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'BLACKWOOD'

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'Blackwood'
Tales from the Outposts

I
FRONTIERS OF EMPIRE

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Edited by

Lieut.-Colonel L. A. Bethell

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'Blackwood'
Tales from the Outposts

I
FRONTIERS OF EMPIRE

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FRONTIERS OF EMPIRE

I.

A COUNTRY POSTMAN.

A POSTMAN is usually a welcome individual, a bearer of friendly letters and interesting parcels, a receiver, at least once a year, of 'boxes.' He has certain facilities in the execution of his duties, bells and knockers, slits in doors and so on, and in cases where his missives are unwelcome, means exist of pressing them on unwilling addressees. In the days before the expedition to Lhassa, the Dalai Lama of Tibet was one to whom letters, those at least bearing an Indian postmark, were distinctly unwelcome —in fact he refused them. During Lord Lansdowne's Viceroyalty a tentative knock had been made on the Tibetan front door, tightly closed against India on the eastern side. Lord Curzon later on knocked more loudly and persistently, but with no result. The door did not move on its hinges. To be accurate, it opened one way only. Tibetans were freely allowed to pass south to sell their wool and shop in the bazaars of India, but the road was closed against traders from the south. Other unfriendly and aggressive actions were proved against the Tibetan Government, breaches of the frontier and things of that kind. Then it became known that the Tibetan door on the north side had been opened wide. A Russian postman, the Buriat Dorjieff, travelled backwards and

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forwards carrying letters between his Holiness and the Tzar on all sorts of subjects, while the latter, by one of those occult metempsychoses common in Tibet, was reputed to have become an incarnation of a Tibetan Saint. It seemed certain, in short, that the Power which had recently absorbed, if not assimilated, vast areas in Turkestan, would shortly proceed to devour Tibet, thus bringing about a coterminous frontier with India, a prospect no Viceroy could view with unconcern. In these circumstances Lord Curzon bethought him—like a predecessor in 1846—of another gateway into the forbidden land, where it marches with an outlying province of the State of Kashmir known as Ladak.

Through the one and only town of the province, called Leh, the Central Asian trade road runs which begins at Srinagar and ends at Yarkand, in its length of 750 odd miles perhaps the most difficult road in the world. From Leh also starts a road to Gartok in Tibet, thence to Lhassa. It was through this little-known postern gate that Lord Curzon now decided to attempt communication with the Grand Lama. Just an autograph letter from His Excellency to be delivered into the hands of the Governor of Western Tibet, known as the Garpon, who, it was hoped, would transmit it onwards to the august addressee. The present writer, at that time a junior 'Political' who, with a Kashmiri colleague, had the charge of the Central Asian Trade road, was to be the bearer of the Viceroy's letter.

In Tibet a road happens naturally. No question arises about surface, gradient, or alignment. It is merely a convenient track followed by caravans from remote times, the passes not too severe for their animals, grazing at intervals not too great, water sweet or bitter, clumps of brushwood for fuel. Even the latter are not really essential,

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for, by what must be called, I suppose, a merciful dispensation of Providence, caravans are in this matter of fuel to a great extent self-supporting, each one burning the dried droppings of the baggage animals of previous caravans. The road from Leh, where I had my headquarters during the summer, to Gartok, some 250 miles, was of such a kind, save for the fact that it lay for the most part near the Indus, in this cradle of its birth a clear stream, often fordable, a striking contrast to the same river lower down, where, a mighty flood, it thunders through the gorges of Rondu, Haramosh and Chilas. This road was out of the question for me by reason of the Tibetan post at the frontier. An alternative road by Rudok was barred for a similar reason. Disguise, efficient in story-books, deceives nobody. A normal Englishman can no more pass himself off as a Tibetan in Tibet than he could as a Habshee in Abyssinia. So it was clear that the postman's only chance of delivering his letter was to travel swiftly by an unguarded route and drop in on the Garpon from the blue, to poke his head in at the dining-room window, so to speak. Of course, no whisper of the plan could be allowed to get abroad. Little pig-tailed men would travel night and day to give warning to Gartok, for though the Ladakis are now subjects of the Dogra Maharajah of Kashmir, they were not so always, and up to the present time Tibet has remained their spiritual home. To find a capable guide was a difficulty, but the right man was discovered ; one who had a fifty-fifty share in a wife at Rudok, a trader in a small way in wool and borax, a pedlar of small wares among the nomads. As a one-time smuggler of *cheras*, he was a quiet and unobtrusive character not given to idle conversation. *Cheras*, it should be said, is a hemp drug produced in Yarkand, degrees more baneful in its effects than opium, but prob-

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ably less so than cocaine, a ' dope ' that does, in fact, cause its addicts to—

> " Grow thin by slow degrees,
> Ugly as chimpanzees,
> Meagre as lizards—
> Go mad and beat their wives,
> Plunge, after shocking lives,
> Razors and carving-knives
> Into their gizzards,"

but more particularly into the gizzards of other people, so that its importation into India has now been prohibited. At the time I am speaking of it was subject to a high duty.

A few days before my intended start, the Wazir-i-Wazarat (or Governor) of Ladak came to see me. Unusually for a Hindu Raj, he was a Mohammedan, a noble of Kabul, who had found it advisable to leave his country for his own good.

" So you go to Gartok," he said, looking at me with a smile. I was taken aback, as I had taken pains to keep the matter secret. But it was no bazaar rumour he had heard, merely a ' little bird,' migratory, probably straight from Simla. No one, however, knew besides himself, and therefore no harm was done, for to him Tibetans and Hindus alike were infidels and polytheists, and doomed to burn. He was, moreover, a friend of mine who could be trusted not to talk.

" Who are you taking ? " he asked.

I told him : Sitara, Kashmiri cook ; Ramzan Ali, the Arghun (Mohammedan-Ladaki half-breed) who had been dragoman with British Joint-Commissioners for many years ; Namgyal, shikari ; some mule-drivers.

" Take one more man," he said.

" Who ? "

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" My servant Mohammed, Pathan."

A tall raw-boned youth with black eyes and a laughing mouth was outside. Of course I took him, and the Wazir pressed on me in addition two sepoys from the small garrison of Kashmir troops.

" Tell your people," I said as he left, " and let it be known in the bazaar that I go to Hanle for shooting."

To avoid any chance of rumours getting ahead of us, preparations were hurried up, and a day later I left with my little caravan in the dark of the morning. Outside the garden gates the road led through the sleeping town, past the Yarkandi caravan-serai breathing out odours warm and horsey; then through the main street and the silent bazaar. A passer-by could almost guess from the aroma the wares of each dark, shuttered shop.

Outside the town, when we settled down to the march, the cold air of the wilderness met us as the salt wind a vessel out of port. We crossed the Indus by a frail wooden bridge of the picturesque local cantilever type as dawn came up, revealing barren plains and rolling mountains. Villages, with many a mile between each, marked by a few gaunt poplar trees and exiguous strips of green, nestled in sheltered hollows; and whilst the valleys were still in shade, a monastery, its white sloping walls clinging to the mountain-side, gleamed in the sunshine. As we crossed a stream that came tumbling from a gorge, there came floating on the air the deep drone of great monastery trumpets.

After a long march we stopped at a hamlet called Gya, the last village in Ladak and chief place in the district of Rupshu, surely the highest, the bleakest, the windiest inhabited region on earth. The only crop that can be grown is barley, but often winter comes while it is yet

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green. The inhabitants are semi-nomadic, living generally in wretched tents of black goats' hair, very inferior to the big comfortable *yorts* of the nomads of the Pamirs, who in only slightly less forbidding surroundings do succeed in making themselves snug. No wonder Tibetan cosmogony provides for the wicked a frozen hell as well as the usual heated variety!

Next day over a high pass, whence one could see a distant lake, a patch of deep blue in a stark yellow plain. We camped that evening in a narrow valley, a hideous spot, the ground leprous white and yellow with borax and brimstone. Hot springs bubbled out here and there, and emitted sulphurous vapours which hung about in the cold air. From here Hanle, our ostensible objective, lay one way, Gartok another, and my party had to be told their real destination. To my disgust the guide began to jib. He came into my tent hanging his tongue out. He would be killed, his family would be killed, everyone would be killed; he dared not go. Ramzan Ali was told off to talk to him and see that he did not vanish away, and for hours after the little circle round the fire had broken up, the two sat on talking and drinking tea. Then the guide got up and turned into the Ladakis' tent. Ramzan Ali came to mine.

"He will go," he said; "he is a poor man and wants the reward, and only asks to be beaten."

So that was arranged. The guide was to be called into my tent in the morning; there would be cries; he would run out, followed by myself with a stick, and at Gartok it would be known he had only submitted to *force majeure*. The little pantomime was duly carried out; the guide awoke the echoes with realistic yells and, as I expected, he never went back on his promise, for the Ladakis are a simple and amiable race who lie with difficulty. Nor,

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I may add, did anything unpleasant subsequently happen to himself or his family.

Leaving evil-smelling Puga we turned north, recrossed the Indus, and then over a high pass. The guide rode ahead, prospecting carefully to avoid *changpas*. That evening, when the landscape was golden under the setting sun, and men and beasts were feeling an intense longing for the sight of a distant clump of tamarisk that might indicate water and a camping ground, from the top of a little saddle he signalled danger. I laid myself beside him on the sand to examine with the glasses the detestable people who stood between us and our night's rest. They were a mile or so away in a hollow. Black tents, men, yaks, dogs, scattered about, all standing out in the vapourless air microscopically sharp. The men were moving slowly around the encampment, evidently engaged in the daily quest for the dried dung fuel (argols), described so pathetically by the gentle Père Huc. " When one is lucky enough," he wrote, "to find half-concealed among the grass an argol recommendable for its size and dryness, there comes over the heart a tranquil joy, one of those sudden emotions which create a transient happiness."

Our caravan men, I fear, wished them no such joys, consigned them rather to nether regions—of the cold kind. So we turned about, and were still wearily travelling when night fell. The caravan closed up, and the guide in front became a black shape, rising and falling with the inequalities of the ground. Bound to his waist below his pigtail was a charm box of copper bearing on it in silver the mystic monogram, ' The Powerful Ten.' In the gloom this caught the light of the stars, and became a faint will-o'-the-wisp, leading on and into the mists of dreamland, so that when my pony suddenly stopped head

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down I nearly fell into the sky, or so it seemed. But the stars were reflected in a pool of water at which he was drinking; and we had reached our camping ground.

The fourth evening out we hoped to be watering at the Indus, the northern branch which unites with the Gartok stream above Tashigang. Through the day we were moving like minute insects along the upper edge of a plain gently tilted, so that one looked south and down across a wide glacis to the snowy ramparts of the Himalaya. There was no wind, and the dust of our caravan hung far behind us in the air. But for the soft shuffle of our animals' hoofs on the sand or the click of a stone, the silence was intense, broken now and again by a marmot's whistle and once by the music of a skein of wild geese high in the heavens winging their way southwards.[1] About mid-day we made a halt to eat, and I pulled out my glasses. A Tibetan landscape is painted in the half-tones peculiar to waterless regions. Here, under the intense light, colours seemed to melt into one another, the yellowy green of the wide plain, the blue of a distant lake, the line of salt shimmering white that marked its margin. But the thin veil that gave an appearance of misty unreality to the middle distance hung low, so that a group of far-off summits in startling reds and yellows and the silver of Himalayan snows stood out sharply against the blue sky. The glasses revealed a herd of wild asses moving about on the plain.

[1] The bar-headed goose breeds in a chain of lakes about Rudok, not far from where we were. On a visit to this lake the previous year I found I could walk quite close to adult birds without their taking flight, and they were flying about my tent all day. They are protected by the monks of the Rudok monastery, and of course I respected their confidence. Similar tameness is sometimes observable in wild sheep in the neighbourhood of monasteries. The fear of human beings seems to be congenital, since it is found in young as in adults. Tameness is always acquired.

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A few dry sticks upright in the ground showed strange signs of life, and became attached to ghost-like bodies—antelope. Looking towards the far-off river, I thought for a moment I saw two dim specks moving east. "Do you see something?" the guide said as I continued to look. I told him. "Are they going fast?" he asked. But they had gone, and I could not pick them up again. He seemed disturbed about those moving specks on the caravan road. Traders or *changpas* would be a little crowd; men on foot would hardly be seen. Two lone riders might be bearers of news to Gartok; if moving fast, almost certainly so. Thus his smuggler's mind argued.

From our line of march the monastery of Tashigang on an eminence near the Indus was just visible. Near it is the frontier post of Demjok, established in the seventeenth century after Basgo, a name not generally included in a list of the great battles of the world, but among these mountains more famous than any, from Cunaxa to Waterloo. A Tibetan army had entered Ladak, and the King, to his own eventual undoing, had begged the help of the Delhi Emperor. "An immense army" arrived from India, defeated the Tibetans at Basgo, and pursued them to Tashigang, where a treaty was made in force to this day. "Whereas Buddhistic and non-Buddhistic religions have nothing in common," it began. Tibetan isolation was formally recognised, and even trade restricted to a few State missions. Only once since then had the seclusion of the Buddhist State been broken by an Indian army, when the Dogra Durbar, encouraged by successes in other mountain regions, planned the subjection of the vast empty spaces to the east. The invasion is presented pictorially in Ladaki frescoes—sepoys, elephants, guns, palanquins in endless procession up and down the white sugar-cones that conventionally represent the snowy

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mountains of Kashmir, at their head the great General Zorawar Singh. After he had penetrated beyond Gartok, his army was surrounded by Tibetans in superior numbers, now sure of their prey. But the Indians' chief enemy was Tibetan cold. The sepoys, poor wretches, were reduced to burning the stocks of their rifles for fuel. In the final attack Zorawar Singh was killed by a spear thrust, and there followed the panic and destruction of a leaderless army. Those who escaped the sword the cold slew; and so Tibet fell back into her slumber.

We were still pushing forward when evening came on, and purple shadows crept among the mountains; the distant snows and islands of cloud flushed pink, and next moment all was grey and cold. A bitter wind sprung up. When it was dark we found ourselves among sand-dunes, and the guide's *ignis fatuus* plunged about like a light at sea. We had a short halt for a mouthful of food, after which the pace dragged, as animals were tired and had been without water all day. About ten o'clock I became aware I was no longer hearing the muleteers talking to their charges, and found that the guide and I were alone. Of the two alternatives, going back to hunt for the caravan or waiting for them to find us, we decided on the latter, on the principle—which may be quite wrong—that two bodies moving about in the dark would be rather less likely to meet than if one was stationary. It was possible too that the caravan would wait till light and then follow our tracks. So we off-saddled and arranged to sleep and watch by turns. My head on my saddle and huddled in my Chitral *choga*, not even the melancholy cries of the guide could prevent my sleeping. Desert sand, however, makes the chilliest of all beds, and before long I found myself wide awake and desperately cold, the guide a silent, amorphous bundle

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by my side. Stamping about to warm myself I shouted, a feeble cry that was at once lost in the solitude. Feeble though it was, to my delight there came an answer, and presently the caravan struggled up. The Kashmiri, who loves the rôle of Providence, had brought a few sticks from the last camp; we had a little water in our bottles, and hot tea, some food and shelter from the wind, put a different aspect on life.

Very early in the morning Mohammed crept into my tent and said he had heard voices about, and the light presently disclosed a group of mounted Tibetans a few hundred yards away. We supposed they must have received warning at Tashigang and had located us in the dark by the fire. Mohammed, I had found, was one whose hands, so to speak, had been taught to war and his fingers to fight at an early age, and by his behaviour it seemed they were itching now to pull a trigger on the idolators. He had to be restrained. As we loaded up and moved off, with the river as our immediate goal, the Tibetans made no attempt to stop us, but moved with us at a little distance on a flank. It struck me afterwards that they would have barred our progress then if we had headed towards Thok Jalung to the north-east, where there are gold workings reputed to be very rich. I was told of a huge nugget found there "as big as a horse's neck," but it was buried again for fear of the guardian spirits!

After going a couple of hours we struck the northern branch of the Indus, and our animals rushed into the water to get their well-earned drink. After fording the river we crossed a sandy plain, and a few miles farther on came to the other branch, on the far side of which we struck the caravan road previously traversed by no European, unless it was Moorcroft in the 'forties. At a loop in the

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stream we made a halt to cook and eat a square meal. The Tibetans, whose numbers had in the meantime increased, now made a ring round us, evidently meaning to stop further progress. I sent Ramzan Ali to parley with a lama, who seemed to be directing matters, a big man in red robes, shaven and shorn, loud in voice and unholy in looks, one of the Hagiocracy who stand to lose most by the admission of light and air, figuratively speaking, into this dark land. "Tell him," I said, "that I am on a peaceable mission to deliver an important letter to the Garpon, which done, I will immediately return to Leh." Ramzan Ali came back smiling nervously. The lama, it appeared, was the Abbot of Tashigang. He was very angry at our having slipped by his frontier post. Why, he had asked, if our mission was peaceable, had we come like thieves by an unknown route? This was a nasty one. As for the letter, the Garpon had no need of it. We must return at once. So we pitched camp, and the Tibetans set guards round. It rather looked as if His Excellency's letter might be returned to sender. When nothing happened the next day, it seemed the Tibetans' immediate plan was to contain us in our camp.

In anticipation of an impasse of this sort, I had brought with me a pony of the Khatgan breed, famous all over the Hindu Kush. He stood but 14 hands, but looked like a miniature hunter, and I had never got to the bottom of him. If Lal Kafir, so called from a coat like burnished copper, had a fault, it was an unpleasant propensity to dance sideways along a narrow mountain road. My plan was to gallop through the guards, and once past them I knew no Tibetan pony could catch him, or even as they say, come up with his dust, and so to Gartok. As a proverb says, "A person who is sent has nought to

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do but convey his message." Lal was brought to my tent very early next morning, and when there was sufficient light I set off. The Tibetans seemed to be on the alert, as a number of men made a rush through to stop me. With a rider shouting and striking with his crop, Lal went through these without a check, scattered the tea-pots of a Tibetan camp kitchen, nearly down over a tent rope, then splash through the river to avoid a knot of men on the way, and we were clear. By the time the Tibetans had blown up their fuses and fired a few shots I was well away. After going a little distance I eased Lal and took a look round. Some mounted Tibetans were following, one rider some distance ahead of the rest, but it was easy to keep away from them all.

The exhilaration of a queer adventure was not to last very long. The low buildings that comprise the town of Gartok (Gar Gunsa), really a headquarter of nomads, were just discernible in the distance when out of a depression in the ground arose a dark mass of men coming in my direction—an army, in fact, if the word may be used for a hundred or so Tibetans mounted and on foot. They were moving on a broad front, in the centre of which, under a red umbrella, was one in a fur robe with a golden straight-brimmed hat of highly glazed papier-maché, a wonderful person who could be none other but the Garpon himself. Riding up to him, I saluted him in the few Tibetan words I knew, but he gave no reply. Instead, four stalwart fellows seized my pony's reins and pulled him round, and I found myself accompanying the crowd in the direction of my camp. Though it did not appeal to me at the time, they were a wonderfully picturesque crowd, in garments of leather, panther skins, or dark blue homespun yellow spotted. Most of them wore high red boots, and on their heads flat caps, below which their hair

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was cut straight across their low foreheads. They carried swords, the scabbards of some of them being decorated with silver and corals. These were stuck crosswise in their belts. Their long matchlocks were furnished with hinged rests made of a pair of antelope horns, folded forward when carried to make an ugly-looking pike.

All my protests had been received in complete silence. Presently the mounted man I had seen behind me in front of the others drew near. It was Mohammed, who unslung his rifle and remained in the offing. Disliking the prospect of being brought to my camp 'in charge,' I assumed quiescence for some time, and then suddenly dug my heels into Lal's sides. He gave a mighty rear and plunge, but the Tibetans hung on, and several others, drawing their swords and making hideous grimaces, rushed at me. I had taken the precaution of leaving my Mauser pistol behind, otherwise that moment would have seen possibly the end of a Tibetan or two, but more probably that of a postman. A fracas was certainly no part of my programme. As it was, the Garpon intervened in time. The humour of the situation was supplied by Mohammed, whom I suddenly noticed circling his pony round at a gallop with his rifle covering every one in turn, and evidently intending a shot into the brown, a proceeding from which he was dissuaded by my earnest shouts.

When we arrived back at my camp I was relieved to find myself free, but the Tibetan crowd began swarming among the tents, evincing curiosity of a rude and disagreeable kind that soon becomes acquisitive and dangerous. The Garpon was no longer in evidence, and I felt it necessary to display the few teeth I possessed. As I went into my tent to get my rifle, a Tibetan who followed me was sent flying. Then with Mohammed and the two sepoys we began to push the crowd back. The

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moment was critical. The Tibetans when pressed gave way, but others closed in again. Some were blowing up the matches of their rifles, and if a single shot had been fired a 'regrettable incident' would certainly have followed. Mohammed again made me feel nervous. I saw one Tibetan—the Pathan red-faced behind him—shoot, in a sort of parabola, out of the cooking tent into the river. Somehow or other to my relief the camp was at last cleared, and Mohammed and the two sepoys were posted as sentries, which done I sent Ramzan Ali with a letter to the Garpon warning him that intruders at night would be fired on. He sent no reply, but presently I saw his tent go up a couple of hundred yards away. The night was spent in visiting my outposts, so to speak, and when day dawned without further incident I felt that the game had been half won, or at any rate if I was to have an interview with the Garpon at all, it would be more or less on equal terms and not in the embarrassing relationship of captive and Governor.

After a decent interval I sent Ramzan Ali to interview the Garpon and try to induce him to come over for a pow-wow: no easy matter, as, Tibetan-like, his fixed idea was somehow or other to get the foreigner out of his country without an interview. As men and ponies had already been put on short rations, had he kept on saying and doing nothing he would certainly have attained his object. Ramzan Ali, however, was one who—to use an Eastern figure—was able to "submit with assurance the wares of his argument to the gaze of the purchasers in the market of subtleties." In our more homely idiom he could talk the hind-leg off a donkey; and he came back successful. Perhaps he made out that my grain bags had no bottom like the widow's ephah—a belief that would present no inherent difficulties in Chang Thang.

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So a meeting was arranged for to-morrow. The square durbar tent brought for the occasion was pitched, camp-chairs decently clad with silk, the Union Jack run up on the camp flag-staff. I was in uniform; my three armed men formed a guard of honour. Ramzan Ali had even persuaded the Garpon that since I myself would meet him on foot, it would be fitting for him to dismount from his big white mule with the scarlet trappings at the limit of my camp.

The Garpon, accompanied by his important advisers, including the Abbot of Tashigang, straddled up to my tent. The latter during the whole of the interview never ceased to swing his prayer-wheel, an instrument of devotion described with masterly ambiguity by a Buddhist pilgrim of 1500 years ago as being of 'incredible efficacy.' The Governor's appearance was that of an upper-class Tibetan—short, a bullet head, a snub nose, thick lips, yet not unpleasing so far as he could be judged with his eyes always concealed by enormous goggles. After seating himself he began in a high voice to ask what I meant by it all. I replied that after he had honoured me by partaking of refreshment I would explain my visit. So my boxes of sweet biscuits, crystallised fruit and such-like were opened, and under the influence of tea with tinned milk and lots of sugar the potentate thawed. The talk ranged from Royalties to railways, telephones to tea-gardens, elephants to aeroplanes—flying machines had even then left the earth—but of all the achievements of Western civilisation I described, one only seemed to arouse in him a sense of astonishment—a certain noble British cow that in twelve months had yielded 1000 gallons of milk!

"And why," he suddenly asked, "do you British living in this wonderful country wish to possess our poor land?"

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"God forbid," I said; "my Government's one desire is for friendly relations between the two countries, that both should enjoy the benefits of trade and that Tibet should be independent and strong. What they do not desire is that Tibet should be absorbed by the Power that is yearly extending her boundaries in Asia." I might truthfully have added that, unlike the Russians, the British have not and never have had a policy of expansion in the East. The fact that millions of Indians had now been brought under British protection and government—to their incalculable advantage—had entirely been brought about by the misgovernment and hostility of their former rulers. I went on to say that it was not within the competence of a messenger to discuss such high politics, and then brought up the subject of the Viceroy's letter. The Garpon made a long speech, in the course of which he several times drew his finger across his throat. The gist was that if he dared to send the letter to Lhassa he would be recalled and executed.

"What is a mere letter?" I asked. "You are not responsible for its contents."

After much more talk he said he would consider the matter, and left. In the evening he sent over for Ramzan Ali, who went, and returned about midnight.

"He will take the letter."

"Good, and what did you tell him?"

"I said that if he refused, the Sahib would find his way to Lhassa with it by some other route, and then the Garpon would certainly be executed!"

There was another durbar next day, and the letter in a big sealed envelope was ceremoniously delivered to the Garpon, who received it standing. He examined minutely the address and the big seal and the Royal coat of arms embossed in gold. He and his advisers were rather exer-

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cised about the latter. Then one asked Ramzan Ali to explain the significance of the strange beasts. I was a little relieved that he did not pass the inquiry on to me, as my ingenuity might have been unequal to the occasion. Ramzan Ali, however, gave a reply that caused heads to wag comprehendingly. Whether lion and unicorn were henceforth to them the tutelary demons of the Government of India or possessed some mysterious significance in the white man's religion is doubtful. All Ramzan Ali would say about it afterwards was that he gave them a reply suitable to their understanding. For me the important thing was that I had obtained not only a receipt for the letter, but a written undertaking from the Garpon to forward it to the Dalai Lama at Lhassa.

I presented some small gifts to the Garpon, and a return visit was made the same day to his tent, where in the cause of duty I drank Tibetan tea. We started on the return journey by the caravan road next morning, and reached Leh five days later, where reports of my capture and ill-treatment at the hands of the Tibetans had been the gossip of the bazaar, and incidentally the cause of much anxiety to my wife.

The next scene, so far as the postman was concerned, was at Srinagar, where we had gone for the winter, some months later. Ramzan Ali, who had been left at Leh, suddenly appeared, his face black from the snows of the passes. He had brought a packet from the Garpon, and on opening the cover, the first thing that came out was the precious letter, seals broken, thumbed and dirty. The Garpon wrote briefly that he had not dared to forward it, though from the condition it was in there could be little doubt that it had actually been to Lhassa and sent back—with suitable instructions. So, after all, the Viceroy's letter was to be "returned to sender," an ending to my

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mission that brought me keen disappointment. A word for the occasion was as usual supplied by Ramzan Ali :

" If your affairs are prosperous it is not due to your deliberation.
If also things go wrong it is not your fault.
Assume the habit of resignation and live content,
Since the good and evil of the world are not ordained by you."

I have often thought that there was one who must have regretted the return of Lord Curzon's letter even more than I did—the Grand Lama himself. The next event was the bursting open of the front doors of Tibet by the Younghusband Mission, and in the following year a Treaty, dictated in the very Potala itself—but not with the Grand Lama, for he had fled.

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II.

A FOOTNOTE.

On Younghusband's Expedition to Lhasa several books have been written. They were written in an era when authors were expected to be highbrows; and, if they possessed learning, that learning was expected of them in print, because it *was* print. A quarter of a century later, it is now possible to try to tell the story from the human angle, in the minor details of how the plus-or-minus man, the born-to-blush-unseen walla, may take a small part in big events and may find amusement in the telling of the little things; of how the daily dinner was got (or failed in the getting), and the night's rest came (or didn't), and of how it feels to go three months without changing a pair of socks. A footnote, in fact, to the bigger events which writers record for subsequent historians, events through which they would have the normal man stride in seven-league boots, his head in the clouds, and flicking the heads off the dandelions (bowing low as he passes) with a field-marshal's baton. Whereas, in very truth, the same man tramps slowly and in great discomfort, his mind fixed on selfish trifles, and, without remission or intermission, most damnably and exceptionally cold.

The main political and military events, therefore, have, of set purpose, been avoided. These will be found in the books; but here very little of battles or treaties. The rôle of the historian will therefore lapse into that of the

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gamin, the under-oaf, whom we meet as a human document in Chaucer, but who has been all too lacking in the chronicles since his day; and if the below-stairs style of treating the matter should strike an incongruous note, be sure that the *en bas*, from cook to tweenie, is every bit as necessary to the structural cosmos of the table as are the strategists and treaty-makers *en haut*.

The unhalting success of the biggest shot in the dark of our frontier history, I ascribe to the personality of one man. This man shared every littlest part of it with the least and lowest of us; one man bore the dirt and cold and dinginess with less complaint than any of us; one man took as many personal, and ten times as many moral, risks. One man, short, sturdy and silent; not the strong silent man of fiction who is generally silent in that he has nothing to say, but a man silent from experience and from an almost intuitive love of the waste places of the world. A man who, unassuming and courteous, had tasted adventure in wide variety; who, ragged and trail-worn, hungry, thirsty and begrimed, could view with joy a world of big deserts, hard living and continual danger; a world composed of a tawny yellow plain supporting on its uninterrupted rim an immeasurable blue vault, and nothing in between but a line of plodding camels, a few silent camel-men and a white man walking ahead across the endless wastes of the Gobi Desert; a world of snow and ice and avalanche, with a few stout hillmen for companions, whose stiff courage needed just his added courage to induce them to venture, with him, the nightmare crossing of the Mustagh Pass; a world of chattering diplomats and schemers; a world of quiet peace inserted, at rare intervals, into the framework of great adventures. No world of them all but found him kindly of nature, forceful of character, direct and simple of purpose. A

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silent man. His head a little bent, his eyes a little sunken under beetling brows; and the faintest, slightest lilt in his walk as of one who knew the world ungarnished, and all the simple straightforward men who used that world —and loved it all.

If this footnote to a great adventure—which was Younghusband's own adventure—fails to show his wise directing hand in every little part of it, and the spirit of the man which inspired us all, then will it indeed have failed.

I.

The books which we have noted are all worth the reading. Since we have read them—and most of us have—there remains only to give a short summary of those aspects which, in the broad, have been explained by all, and are therefore common ground.

In 1903 Lord Curzon, Viceroy, was confronted with a situation critical to one to whom the safeguarding of India by the inviolability of her frontiers, and a strenuous antipathy to the Russ wherever found, were very stuff o' conscience. Briefly, Russia was trying to gain a protectorate over that mistily unknown and obstinately mediæval land of Tibet, whose steady exclusiveness had formed the principal safeguard of India's northern frontiers; while Tibet, like a scraggy elderly virgin, was beginning to simper in return. Within a very short space of time the Government at home—not yet undermined by hostile demagogues—had given permission that the matter might be undertaken; and Lord Curzon had sent for the one man whose past record and abiding steadfastness of character warranted his being chosen for a task the difficulties of which none could gauge, since they were unknown.

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The diplomatic aim was clear, that of obtaining an unconditional surrender from a Government composed of obstinate monks who had joined hands with our enemy. That the surrender could be brought about only by military force nobody, least of all the leader of the expedition, doubted for a moment ; our history of unsuccess in verbal dealings with these people was notorious. Yet, for very fairness' sake, some such attempt at achievement by reasoning had to be made ; firmness, fairness, unruffled temper ; but, in the last resort, force ; for such a singular attempt, had it failed, would have damaged for a generation our prestige on the principal frontier of the Empire.

But here all clearness stopped dead. The land itself was a mystery. What little information existed about it had been gathered by a few daring men, mostly native, who, at long intervals, had crept into the country at considerable risk and had, not invariably, emerged, bringing news. Few, perhaps half a dozen in all the records, had penetrated to Lhasa itself. The movements of all had been confined to the narrow path which carried the exiguous single-file trade of the land ; their view bounded by what they could see from the track ; their living limited to the capacity of the evening caravanserai ; their information gathered by chance remarks at long intervals, lest suspicion be aroused ; their very results verbal and memorised, where written records might well have been a death-warrant. The sum-total of it all, expressed and implied, would hardly have carried a platoon from India to Lhasa.

In every instance the traveller had tacked himself on to a small caravan, such caravans as could find shelter and feeding at the posts dotted at long intervals along the mule-route. No caravan might exceed a certain small

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number of beasts, since everything in excess of that would certainly starve. For here was a land of emptiness; a cold desert, with a few oases supporting a scanty population; too high, except in a few spots, to produce the means of feeding man; too cold for a blade of wild grass; too barren to support even a raven to peck at the frozen corpse by the wayside. In such a land an invading force might exhaust its resources and starve in a week. Everything would have to be carried.

Here it is that the ragtag and bobtail—to wit, we of the minor military responsibilities—find our interest in the matter taking shape; for it is just this matter of carrying, of transport, which is the first preoccupation of any man or body of men advancing into the unknown. The problem, subject to the wise decisions of our leaders, was present to one and all of us throughout the expedition, and never once did the situation ease itself. Never once could we, or would we, have taken the thing lightly, for on it depended not only our creature comforts but our lives, no less. I put it, therefore, in the forefront of our personal preoccupations.

The difficulty of advancing into a desert on one's own carrying power resolves itself into this—not only has the load to be carried, but the carrier has to be supplied with the energy wherewith to carry. Put at its maximum, if a mule, carrying 160 lb., be asked to carry his own food alone with nothing else useful to an expedition added, and if the mule eats ten pounds a day, you may march him for sixteen days into the wilderness. There you will stop; and, failing food, the mule will lie down and die; and there you are. Similarly, you may take him eight days' march into the desert, and straightway come eight marches back again to your base, arriving just in time to draw your to-morrow's rations. Either way, you will make no pro-

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gress ; and when it is considered that, on an expeditionary basis, the mule's food may only be 15 per cent of his own load of mixed necessities for his masters, it is clear that, failing some novel solution, your beast of burden will get you only two and a half days forward on your journey.

The solution lay, imprimis, in finding some animal which would work but not eat, or in so multiplying its carrying power that the consumption would be negligible. In the light of zoology, as then known, the former seemed out of the question ; in the latter case, wheeled transport seemed indicated, since a beast will, on good surfaces, drag three times what he can carry. Those of us who, when the expedition was in its infancy, sat at the base and gazed across the Darjeeling foothills at the towering walls of the greatest ice and rock barrier on this earth, may well have smiled at the notion of wheels.

As Kipling told his audience at the Royal Geographical Society in 1914,[1] where men's minds work on the strain of a problem, the solution often presents itself to them in the form of a diagram. Words, orders, descriptions fail ; but a stump of pencil and the back of an envelope sometimes provide the key. So here. And the diagram was as on opposite page.

Let ABC be a right-angled triangle, with the right angle at A.

Let AC be the distance to be advanced.

Now if AB be subdivided into equal divisions, each of which represents the carrying power which will suffice to advance a force one division, a day's march, along the line AC, and if from these points on AB lines parallel to BC be drawn to intersect with AC, it follows that by lengthening AB indefinitely beyond B (say to B'), AC can

[1] See ' A Book of Words,' p. 99.

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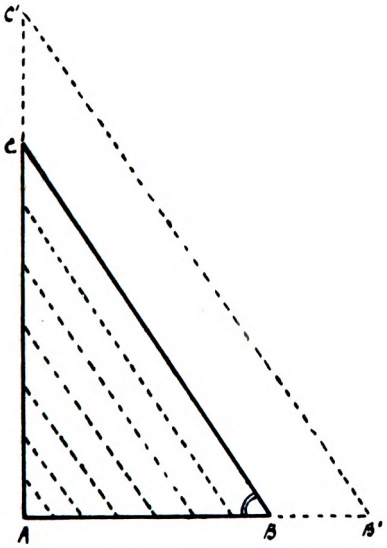
be made as long as you wish (as at C'). In other words, that by using unlimited transport at the outset, you can get as far as you require. Further, *ex hypothesi*, the value of the angle ABC represents the diminution of carrying power due to the transport eating a portion of its own load; since, were there no diminution, AC and BC



would be parallel, or would coincide, and there would then be neither problem nor 'triangle of problem' representing it.

True, O king. That would work very well if the force could march on one broad straight front, over flat country with no obstacles. But here we had a force, till the open plains were reached, advancing on the narrowest known front, that of one man; in fact, in single file. Transport, at the outset, could therefore not be unlimited, for the

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length of a line of transport is governed by the length of the day's march, the *reductio ad absurdum* being reached where the head of the column has reached its evening halting-place before the tail of its transport has left the last camping ground, the route in between being thereupon packed with laden mules in single file.

AB and AC therefore acquired a limit in terms of one day's march ; and, though the knowledge of the value of the angle ABC as a ' coefficient of evaporation ' was valuable, the problem was still far from solved.

Thereupon, after much cogitation and even more argument, the Bright Idea was born. Such ideas are *not* born, Minerva-like and fully armed, from the brain of one Olympian, but are usually the result of suggestions and siftings in the ' Portugee parliament ' into which, in the end, technical discussions among a group of soldiers resolve themselves. " Look here, laddo, why can't we . . ." or, " I say, won't this do . . ." So with the Bright Idea. In its ultimate shape it resolved itself into the fact that if a big convoy of food, with just sufficient men to guard it, were rushed into the country and the mules immediately brought out again, the food would remain while the bugbear of hungry mules to diminish it would cease to affect the problem. In other words, the idea evolved was the Theory of Advanced Depots. By this theory, it was possible to place a small force inside the first limits of Tibet and then, by a ' tip and run ' process of sending in large convoys of necessaries whose mules forthwith retreated to pick up further loads next day, to pile up sufficient rations for man *and* beast to make a big accumulation. When the accumulation had grown sufficiently large, it would then be possible to bring up the wasteful mules, base them on the new dump, and let them live on it while the force made another bound forward,

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the whole process being repeated *ad infinitum*, or till finality had been reached in our argument with the Tibetans.

The 'triangle' thereupon once more came into operation, since a series of such 'bounds' forward would be represented by a series of triangles, each resting on the apex of the last, the hope and determination being that the apex of the final triangle would coincide with Lhasa or some such other point where the Tibetans would collapse.

How far this anticipation was from realisation will subsequently be seen.

One last factor limiting the solution to advances 'by bounds,' and preventing movement from several bases in India to converge on Tibet, thereby multiplying the avenues of supply, was the fact that, five marches from the base, the single-file track traversed the one single narrow pass which, in full view of Kanchenjunga and close to Everest, crosses the backbone of the Himalaya at a point higher than the highest point of Europe. The Jelap La Pass. Over this wicked obstacle every atom of gear larger than the load of one side of a mule which was required by the expedition had to be man-handled in such subdivisions as would make it seizable and carryable by coolies; for a mule will carry, and will barge ahead over bad obstacles, but he is at a loss when it comes to wriggling, humouring and generally persuading an awkward load over a nearly unclimbable bit of ground. This bottle-neck near the very outset of the problem at one time bade fair to paralyse the whole solution, since, apart from the fact that it constricted what should have been the smooth flow of supplies, it had also to be kept open, and used, in weather ranging from calm though frozen sunshine to the bitterest blizzard. Had the bottle-neck

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ever closed, the expedition would inevitably have been strangled.

The mule was our unit of calculation, and well it was for us that he was so. For, in any circumstances, in any weather, in any temperature, even when the mercury in the bulb got sulky and refused to register, the mule played the game. It might have been thought that such an expedition would be murderously wasteful in animals ; but the mule, whether starved, up to his ears in a snowdrift, or, as once happened, up to his neck for twelve hours in a frozen lake into which he had pitched from an overhanging height, the ice making him a collar—worked, overworked, rested and overworked again—the mule came out of it with colours (and heels) flying. In some queer way known only to mules, they, going into the country normally fine-drawn, came out of it *romping fat!*

He is a mass of contradictions, is the mule ; *plus* where every other beast is *minus*, and negative where the rest of creation is positive. So it is hardly to be wondered at that, at the end, the officers of the many mule-corps on the expedition were able to report that their casualties, after a year on the roof of the world, were actually less than those of an ordinary twelvemonth in cantonments.

In common with all other frontier officers, past and present, this scribe rises from his chair, closes his heels, and solemnly takes off his hat to the mule. Rough, ill-tempered and unnecessarily handy with teeth and heels, the ' khachhar ' of the supply and transport is a sahib ; one whom you may fittingly ask to dine at the mess on guest-nights, propose for membership of your club, or introduce to your wife and daughters.

. . . . . .

There was, at first sight, nothing in the land itself

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which would lighten our transport difficulties. With the exception of a few scattered oases which supported a population incommensurate with the vastness of the land, and disproportionately large colonies of monks, the country was empty. Smooth your hand along the table. Bare. Just like that. From such a population, deliberately limiting itself by polyandry to the margin of what the soil would produce, little surplus could be hoped. Yet one thing it had which, for a time, seemed as if it would solve our transport problem; an uncouth beast of burden which, in some primeval fashion, seemed to be able to pick up a living off the bitter barrens across which we were slowly advancing. Watch it for an hour, when turned loose to 'graze.' At the end of the time you would swear a solemn oath that its diet was stones and shingle. As a matter of fact, it seems to be able to dig up with its great fore-feet a subsoil saxifrage moss of sorts, a thing which must be almost chemically concentrated nourishment to support such a vast and hairy bulk.

Yaks.

Great, ponderous, slow-moving beasts, proof against cold and wind, carrying dependent from their underparts a great sagging mass of tangled woolly hair wherein stones, bits of straw and stick and, you would say, even birds' nests, had there been birds, combined to form a swinging mattress whereon the beast subsided to sleep; head and horns carried low, tail vast and bushy, the wool of which, alone, would have been enough to stuff three pillows; and between the two, a mass of disgruntled depression.

With vast internal rumblings, glowering eyes half-closed and expressionless, and an inveterate habit of grinding his teeth while he rolled along at a reluctant one and a half miles an hour, the yak nursed that hidden and groundless grievance against all mankind, and everything in general,

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which was such a puzzle to us to the very end. This self-absorbed yak pessimism was our greatest asset in dealing with the beast. Had it permitted the co-existence of nerves, of shyings, buttings and other caracolings, we should have been hard put to it indeed in a land the altitude of which made a dropped load a labour for three panting men to readjust, and where the chasing of a runaway animal would have been clean out of the question. The infectious depression to be got from half an hour of his company was enough to make you go out and howl at the moon. Rarely does a scientific label reflect a human attribute; but in *Bos grunniens* we have not only a pointedly true but an inevitable name for the grousing ox.

Deep though the gloom was which surrounded him, he came as a ray of sunshine to us. Here, at last, was the zoological contradiction in terms, the beast which would live, work, and apparently eat nothing; the beast which would carry a load without eating it. By some means known only to the organiser of our Transport Department, they were collected in droves which at one time touched the two thousand mark; and though they worked with unconquerable reluctance, moved slowly, and could never be cured of the habit of lying down and dying, they lightened our transport problem at a time when the difficulty seemed insurmountable.

Indeed, at one time they bade fair to do more. The Himalayan barrier once crossed, and the wide plateaux across which we moved stretching apparently steadily before us, it was not long before half a dozen of us were thinking out the possibility of wheeled transport. None was there, of course, in a land which had not a wheel, except a prayer-wheel, within its borders. But could it be got? Up from India presently came some dozens of

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the light two-wheeled *ekka* of the Punjab. These, dismantled, and manhandled piecemeal across the passes, were put together on the plains.

From this emerged the Joke. The depression of the grunting ox simply invited leg-pulling. We would harness him to the ekka, and he should add to his already superlative value by pulling three times what he could carry. It was this scribe's privilege to attend at the first séance when, the harness having been thought out, made and put together, it was intended to introduce the furry slumbering volcano to the strange wheeled thing. No Buffalo Bill's Show ever provided more thrilling anticipation and preparation. A white officer volunteered to be the first to harness the brute. Surprise was great when the yak made no demur whatever ; indeed, come to think of it, you would hardly expect a beast with an almost bullet-proof coat to be seriously tickled by breastband, crupper and traces. We led him slowly up to the ekka ; with infinite precautions we lowered the shafts on to his flanks ; quickly, but very gingerly, we made fast the girth and hitched the traces ; and, finally, jumped clear in expectation of the absolutely inevitable explosion.

Nothing happened.

Dead silence !

Here were we, literally making history in harnessing a bit of the Ice Age to the works of the twentieth century, and the extraordinary animal refused even to acknowledge an event with the importance of which bloodshed would have been quite in keeping.

Grunch . . . *Grunch* . . . he nursed his grievance.

Long silence.

" At least he'll wake up when he begins to draw the thing, and it rattles ? "

Not a bit. He, and, later, a dozen others like him.

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allowed themselves to be perfectly peaceably harnessed and led, seeming, if anything, to like it.

All that the achievement implied was not immediately realised—the transport of six *maunds* where two, only, had been possible. But as soon as realised it was wired off to the Chief Transport Officer, and a large order for more ekkas was at once sent down to India.

To our lasting regret, by the time these had been obtained, trained to the base, dismembered and lugged laboriously over the passes, the expedition was too far forward to benefit by them. One imagined, to the end, a well-drilled line abreast of gruntulous bovines advancing slowly across the Plain of the Holy of Holies, and the immediate collapse of the obstinate mystics with whom we had come to treat. Boadicea's chariots . . . Hannibal's elephants. . . . One of the romances of military history was, in the end, still-born.

. . . . . .

By mule, by yak, by coolie, and, sparsely, by ekka, the column moved forward. Dooms slow.

II.

Throughout every problem, hitch and solution, we had the wise and steady guidance of our leader.

He shared our daily life, subject always to the fact that he would interfere with no man's task when once the task had been set ; nobody knew better than he that the one way to make a man trustworthy is to trust him. But, the day's work over, somewhere before dinner-time any one of the several mess-tents of the various units would fill up with a heterogeneous collection of soldiers, transport officers, interpreters, journalists, antiquarians, sappers of the survey, the *omnium gatherum* of an expedition

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which brought the most divergent types into common concord, and drove them to a 'gin-crawl' in one another's messes. Or rather was it a 'rum-crawl'; few private mess-stores were there, on which to mix our drinks, and rum was a commissariat issue.

Then, through our blue fog of tobacco and a smell like the inside of a methylated spirit can, would peer a bearded face, and the sturdy, solemn figure of Younghusband would loom into the lantern light. A dozen would get up to offer him their camp-chairs, as he asked, "May I come in?" and closed the tent-flap quickly behind him to keep out the bitter cold. The kindly brown eyes under the bushy eyebrows would put at his ease the most self-conscious subaltern among us; eyes that bent with a very human appreciation to the warm brown stuff handed to him in an enamel mug. One can still remember the characteristic push forward of the wide firm underlip which gathered in a mouthful of walrusy moustache whereto a few drops had adhered.

But even he could not help us—unless by sharing with us—what I was going to call our next problem; hardly our next, in that it was with us from the outset and never abated. The cold.

The bitter and penetrating cold, still and sterile by night, rising to the incessant grit-laden gales of icy wind which blew with devastating venom from the north from nine in the morning to sunset—day in, day out, without intermission—was with us always; but, after the first gasp of surprise at what an almost lunar cold could be, comment on it ceased. To hear "Brr-rr-r, isn't it *cold?*" marked the tyro, just as, "Oh lord, *isn't* it hot?" labelled the griffin in the land whence we had come. The unalleviated misery of it was common to us all. Before creeping into the sleeping-bag and strapping the canvas

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cover of the valise over the whole, we put extra clothing on to our already thick day-wear. The sleeper lay on his back, since a sideways turn would open a leak of air into the bag. When he awoke in the morning, just below his chin there would be a small white pyramid on the valise cover where his breath, freezing an inch from his lips, had fallen in light snow during the night. If his servant had the energy to bring a cupful of boiling hot tea at dawn, and put it down by the pillow, quick must be the sahib to unravel himself and reach for it, for in a moment it was tepid, and in a minute the cup would have frozen to the saucer.

Rifle oil froze, and the mechanism had to be bright polished to prevent it from jamming solid. The jackets of the machine-guns held a mixture of rum and water, lest they should emulate a bursting water-pipe. Boots, whether on the feet or off, were taken to bed with the owner, otherwise he would never have been able to get them on again. The Frozen Waterfall at Dotha was one of the sights of the expedition, a straight column of ice one hundred and fifty feet high and twenty-five feet thick, formed by layer after layer of water coagulating as it dribbled over the edge and freezing solid ere it reached the bottom—a sheer tower of iridescent beauty weighing an incalculable number of tons—the father of all icicles. Our troubles from the cold were the commonplaces of daily and nightly life, and barely mentioned; tales on the subject got poor hearing unless, on rare occasions, they had a lighter aspect, as, for instance, that of an officer who came up later. The first night over the pass, lacking counsel, he put his teeth into a tumbler of water. In the morning he reached for the tumbler and found it frozen solid, his dentures in the midst like a quail in aspic. He had to go to the cookhouse to thaw

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them out, or there would have been no breakfast for him.

Why to the cookhouse? With pain and trouble, enough fuel was brought up for cooking purposes, and every pound husbanded where it weighed as much, and took as much transport, as the food it cooked. From first to last we were dependent for warmth on the natural heat of our bodies; had a camp-fire even once been lit, it would have aroused as instant a protest as would the sight of a man lighting his pipe with a five-pound note. Even then the fuel ration had to be doubled; water, at 15,000 feet, boils at 180° Fahrenheit, and the boiling process has to be long to break down the fibres of what is cooked. At some of the greater altitudes it is possible to put a hand into a kettle freshly boiled for tea, and suffer no more than discomfort.

In that first winter—indeed, throughout the expedition except during the two months of summer—personal cleanliness went by default. Had there been fuel to spare for hot water, the bath would have suffered the same fate as that of the teacup. There was no shaving, and a most atrocious beard disguised everybody A change of under clothing became a risky adventure, rarely to be indulged in; and since going to bed involved only the addition of more clothing to that of the day, the matter was steadily overlooked. The writer remembers two pairs of thick socks, pulled one on top of the other at the beginning of November, the start, and removed on Leap Year's Day. The legs and feet were normal, but the soles had been compacted into a kind of hard felt which resisted separation and, force being used, snapped like a biscuit.

Did you know that though snakes shed their skin all of a piece, the human animal, apparently lazier, sheds his bit by bit? It was certainly news to us. But one memor-

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able day, when the bitter wind dropped for once to a blessed peace, and the mercury awoke, stretched and turned over in its bulb preparatory to another long sleep, several of us took our courage in both hands, crawled into bed and changed! Arriving subsequently in the mess, and rather vainglorious—as men may be who have overcome the weaknesses of the flesh—we compared notes, and decided that what our skins really needed was not a bath at all, but a good stiff clothes-brush. "Furfuraceous desquamation," the still-in-statu-quo doctor muttered into his fur-lined beard; "you fellows are in the last and most infectious stage of scarlet fever. That's what's the matter with you. I'll have to see about it. Damned lepers."

We ought to have been the worse for this condition of non-changing. But we were not. For, somehow, the imagination saw the lesser companions of the human race—whether visible to the naked eye or under the microscope—advancing up the Himalayan wall, and, at somewhere about the snow-line which we had long overpassed, waving helpless antennæ, shaking sorrowful and chitinous heads, and turning back home again.

The air was so sterile that even an exposed film would keep, without deterioration, for months before being developed. Skins of dead beasts never went bad, but dried to parchment Commissariat losses—by marching mules nibbling the compacted rectangular blocks of compressed fodder on one another's backs into octahedrons, dodecahedrons and other multilateral and polyangular travesties of the original load—were severe; but losses from deterioration, that unfailing stand-by of the babu who has inaccurate accounts to square, simply never occurred.

The sorry human débris of our first battlefields, left

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perforce unburied on frozen shingle on which no pick-axe could make an impression, were there months later when we passed on our way home. Fingers shrivelled, lips retracted from white teeth, but otherwise normal human beings—asleep.

Define it ? Would it be too ambitious, or too incredible, were one to say that for a year we lived in an air that was literally aseptic ?

. . . . . .

Every atom of this discomfort was our leader's as much as our own. Was he back at the base, or even on the inner Himalayan slope where *some* fuel, at least, survived ? Not he. Right at the top of the line, where discomforts were worst and dangers afterwards thickest, he sat with an inadequate escort and gave his henchmen leave (as they also had the liking) to build up the show behind him till all might move forward again. He never hurried nor worried us, even though the advanced bases, the accumulations for the forward bounds, moved slowly and more slowly, for by now it was obvious that the expedition would be opposed, and something more than a ration-guard at the head of the line became necessary. The foremost body grew into an armed camp which ate up the stuff almost as fast as it accumulated.

III.

And here we come to our next preoccupation—the Tibetans, who, from this time onwards, rather took charge of the stage, and relegated our other worries to a running accompaniment.

Three months had passed in making the 'bounds' which brought us to the point of active opposition. Younghusband's diplomacy, always ready to negotiate with the

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lamas if thereby he could obtain the irreducible minimum of the guarantees deemed necessary, was steadily met by "Shoo!" "Avaunt!" "*vade retro, Sathanas,*" and other forms of monkish discouragement which showed an increasing bitterness and at last developed into threats. Nobody wished to fight if negotiation were possible; but it soon became obvious that the Dalai Lama who ruled the land looked forward to our evacuation of southern Tibet as a matter of necessity, since it was never believed either that our supply arrangements were at the time sufficient, or that they would grow increasingly efficient. Pull devil, pull baker, we did it somehow; and when once the stage of improvisation had passed and things moved smoothly, however slowly, the opposition passed from voluble chatterings to a grim silence which covered many possibilities. Rumours reached us from time to time of armies about to descend on us, including such picturesque details as mailed horsemen who, unfortunately, never materialised. But it was not long before the lamas turned loose on us soggy great hordes of the stout fighting material of the country. These, though archaically armed, were no whit reluctant, and were a sufficiently tough proposition to a modern force fighting under compulsorily mediæval conditions; from first to last they never outnumbered us by less than seven or ten to one.

They settled in a swarm at a point some seven miles in advance of where sat Younghusband cheek by jowl with our foremost outposts. With the Mongolian inborn faith in a wall, a faith dating from prehistorical times—whether the defence were across a valley, round a city, or about the fringes of an empire—these Tibetans built them a wall where the open plain was narrowed by a large frozen lake and an outlying spur of one of the ranges. From the edge of the lake to the bottom of the cliff they built it,

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thus barring the track by which we would advance. Inveterate builders, as all Tibetans are, they ran it up in a night. It was their equivalent for 'full stop.' No compromise.

Reconnoitred, it was a wall right enough ; and the area beyond was a brown and buzzing beehive.

Next morning, very early, our leader was missing. Who were we to question his movements ? He had probably ridden back, on one of his errands, down the line. But that evening the look-out sentry signalled back to us the approach of two horsemen from the direction of the Tibetans ; and, shortly afterwards, Younghusband rode in. He looked despondent, a little more silent than usual. Why ? Because he, knowing in his bones that the archaic obstructionists should, in common fairness, be given the chance of avoiding Gurkha, Sikh and Pathan, and the incredible effects of modern rapid fire—knowing, moreover, what can be done by one man armed with courtesy, tact and a clear idea of what he wanted—had got up early that morning. Taking one orderly and no escort, he had ridden out to the Tibetan wall, had passed through into the camp and, neglecting the debased and impossible lamas, had asked for the biggest civil and military officials present. With these he had sat down to a day-long argument—an argument which, stripped of trimmings, resolved itself into a question of whether they, barring his way, should clear out, or whether he should pack up and go back to India.

Neither side erred in courtesy or good manners. We may imagine Younghusband—as we saw him often afterwards—well versed in the punctilio of Mongolian debate, seated on a spread carpet facing the three big hats ; legs crossed, hands up sleeves, sliding and slipping along in the singsong monosyllables ; each fresh sentence prefaced

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by the sizzling intake of breath through closed teeth, the hallmark of ceremony, and the slight bowing forward from the waist in rhythm with the points of his argument ; the 's's' all most ceremoniously flattened to 'z's' ; the right hand only removed from within the left sleeve to raise it, palm outwards, forefinger and thumb joined, and the least little side-to-side waggle of the finger-tips till, the point made, the hand slid back up the other sleeve and the body half-bowed again from the waist ; the little uplift of the bushy eyebrows, and the flattening of the deep rift between the two big, brown spaniel-eyes ; the halt on the rising voice, and the silence which marked the close of one more period in his argument.

Then the patience—the '*La*-lö' interjection at the proper places and the slight bow, as each of the points in the opposing argument was made.

Hour after hour, without a mistake, holding tenaciously and single-handed to a single purpose, and never once erring in the *bienséance* of oriental good manners ; hour after hour, point and counter-point, each driving the other into a corner whence each in turn cleverly escaped and started the interminable round once more ; no point of ceremony omitted, even though his legs must have passed from pins and needles to numbness and on to an almost complete absence of feeling ; even though hour by hour his hunger must have grown ravenous, and he touched nothing ; even though his very life hung, as it must have hung in that campful of puzzled hostility, hour after hour by a single steadily fraying thread.

So might Kublai Khan, so might the Khan's remotest ancestor, have held converse with ambassadors.

In word, in voice, manner and gesture, in play of features and in the instinctive tact of generations of good blood behind him, he, sitting alone on the roof of

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the world, must have come very near to convincing the mediævalism which faced him.

Absolutely fruitless. *Non possumus*, without any modification.

Be sure that when at last he failed, as fail he did, no other Englishman could have come so close to success.

At the end, the three big hats—standing most mannerly at bridle and stirrup—assisted him on to his horse. He rode silently out of the camp. Last and least little touch of ceremony, till he was well out of sight of the wall he forbore to turn up his coat-collar against the bitter wind.

And now do you understand me when I say that that man's smallest wish, unexpressed or half-divined, was both law and stimulus to the least of us ?

The man is still alive ? Bad taste, this way of speaking of him ? Point-blank, I refuse to admit it. In these days, when organised societies exist for the glorification of the living, when politicians publish their autobiographies and when self-made magnates preview and annotate advance copies of 'interviews' with them written for the Stunt Press—are we to refuse to the most unpretentious of men, happily still with us, a little of what a whole province once gave to John Nicholson ? I, who write this, can remember the very way in which he held his reins bunched in his left hand, and the fact that his right hand was in his coat-pocket as he, coming in quietly by the back way, rode into camp that evening. And that was twenty-four years ago.

Well, well ; he did his best for them, apart from what he tried to accomplish for us and for our mission. There was brilliant unwisdom in it, for the expedition might well have been decapitated, and what other head could have taken his place on those heaving and struggling shoulders ? Or, worse, he might have been held as a

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hostage for our return to India; in which case he would undoubtedly have had to be sacrificed. He knew it, and faced it, he who held self so lightly and the job in hand so seriously. He did his best for the Tibetans; and when, a short time afterwards, the main force had concentrated once more at his headquarters at the head of the line, and had gone out—man, horse and gun—to see to the business of the wall, he still did his best for them to the last possible moment, since our orders were to disarm them, if possible, and to avoid a fight if avoidance were feasible.

It was, alas, a match to a powder magazine. Some hours later, the wall and the plain beyond it were a shambles. Pass quickly over what happened; many of you will have read of it in all its ghastly details; but the man who, apart from his own lacerations, felt as acutely as any of us the pitiful futility of it all, was Edmund Candler, whom many 'Maga' readers will remember, and whom, with seven sword-cuts dinted into him, this scribe helped to bandage back into human semblance.

Thereafter it was war, pure and simple. We passed over the wreckage of Guru and its wall, fought the fight of the Red Gorge, as spectacular a piece of mediæval warfare as could be wished, and presently found ourselves at the town of Gyantse. A town, save the mark; but one of three in all Tibet, the other two being Lhasa and Shigatse; none of them bigger than, say, the small township of Reigate, in Surrey. I say mediæval warfare, since we, a modern force, were stripped of half our advantage by the ever-present transport question which shortened our stride in even the simple war-gear of those days, particularly in ammunition for the mountain battery which proved later our main means of blowing an entrance into the extraordinarily solid buildings which the Tibetans

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defended against us; and in the rabbit-warren alleys between houses packed together for warmth, a gas-pipe gun was quite as effective as a rifle. Apart from this, the Tibetans always heavily outnumbered us, and it says much for our fighting material which went to Lhasa that the issue of many of the fights turned out as well as it did.

As a single instance, the record in altitude above sea-level was held by the fight at the Kharo La, the last before entering Lhasa, where our main body forced the pass at 16,400 feet, while we of the Gurkhas on their right flank climbed a glacier and fought a crisp little battle on our own at 19,000. Nothing much for the Gurkha? Possibly not, but the normal habitat of the Sikhs who were the spear-point of the attack on the pass itself is, as near as makes no matter, at sea-level.

The military situation was never free from anxiety, nor was there ever a time when our leader could have taken a liberty with the powers of our opponents. Any *bundobust* had to be brass-bound and copper-bottomed in a country where man, his land and his climate were each and all poised for a sudden swoop on any weak joint in our armour. Had a disaster occurred, help from India would of necessity have been as slow to arrive as was our initial advance, and therefore valueless. The force was as much *en l'air* as was ever an expedition to the Pole. In these circumstances, defeat or a decided check was out of the question. The fighting portion saw to that; but Younghusband's was the foresight which never put us in an unmanageable situation.

IV.

At Gyantse he sat, with a barely adequate escort, and did his utmost to gather to him responsible leaders of the Tibetans with whom to negotiate. No opportunity was

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there to go out and repeat his previous single-handed heroic madness, trying to argue the obstinate obstructionists into a treaty which would cover all our requirements. The obstructionists simply were not there, though the more or less aggressive messages which they sent in from points unidentifiably distant relieved the otherwise impossible blankness of a complete refusal to treat.

We, the main force, had perforce to go back many marches. The transport situation would never have fed us, up at the top, and we were in the position of having made our bound forward as it were an overdraft on the bank, and the balance had to be squared. But Younghusband was there at the top—could he have been anywhere else?—and we had left with him Gurkhas of the writer's regiment, and Sikhs, the two together the stiffest stuff in the expedition, to see to it that he came to no harm, and just enough food on which to live.

What happened next we all know. In the midst of promises to negotiate, dates fixed for conferences and all the other camouflage of political trickery which the monks could devise, one night they let loose on him and his small escort a horde of yelling fiends who only just failed to swarm into the camp on all sides and obliterate it. A merry night for Younghusband, who, with a borrowed rifle and bayonet, took an hour's holiday from thinking and planning, and, in the forefront of it all, fought as part of a group of elated little Gurkhas who knew not in the darkness, and little cared, who might be the berserk sahib among them who was making of it a battle so debonair.

Then followed a weary long wait, in which the Tibetans, learning caution from what had happened to them that night, tried encirclement, siege of a sort and long-range bombardment with primitive ordnance which made a

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devastating noise and with which they at first slung irregular lumps of roughly spherical iron or lead on to a target which none could miss, which metals presently failing, the spheres became a rich red copper, prized by many of us ever since ; they make beautiful paper-weights. By modern standards, it was all the sorriest wig-pulling and face-scratching, and the escort more than held its own.

It was, however, getting thoroughly tired of it by the time when we were once more able to bring up the main force ; and in a fight, which at last really *was* a fight, and which hung for a long day in the balance, were able to wipe off the slate the seven thousand Tibetans who, in a mediæval fortress overlooking Younghusband's camp, seemed at first to be almost too heavy metal for us.

Details both of the fighting and of the fruitless negotiations between periods of fighting, are on record in the books to which I have referred, so they need not be enlarged on here. The cardinal fact, however, emerged that after nine months of mixed battle and blarney we were as far as when we started from coming to terms with the lama hierarchy. Lhasa itself became increasingly evident as the only place in which we could apply final and conclusive pressure ; and since conclusion there must be, we must get to Lhasa.

Slowly and painfully we had achieved the apparently impossible, and had brought half-way to its destination a force fit to cope with any opposition likely to be offered to us ; and this along a line of communications which lay astride country unmapped, unknown and the most difficult outside the Arctic Circle. We could not have done it a day earlier. As it was, every ' bound ' had strained transport and supply to breaking-point.

I shall have been a clumsy chronicler indeed if, by now, the reader has failed to realise that our main, our almost

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insuperable, difficulties lay in the cold, the lack of transport and the bitter barrenness of the land. These, and not their armies, were the lamas' strong and unfailing allies on whom they counted for our eventual discomfiture. Half their obstinacy was almost due to a curiosity in seeing how long we could stick out against obstacles which nobody, in the known history of the land, had tackled on a large scale.

But for us time was passing. The personnel on the line of communications behind us was, through sheer hardship and overwork, growing less and less efficient, and we could call on them for no greater effort. India, knowing our difficulties, was as patient as ever. But the Government at Westminster, sinking by measurable steps to an impending dissolution, began to show a nervousness under the pointed inquiries of foreign and hostile diplomacy, the acidity of which took strength from every fresh rumour that we were 'hung up.' Had pressure and inquiries become unmanageable, such a political *dégringolade* might have followed as would have brought the subsequent era of Manchester and Limehouse two years nearer. Briefly, Westminster wished to know "What about it?" Nor was the inquiry unwelcome, since the answer, "We must go to Lhasa," brought the unexpected and welcome reply, "Proceed."

In addition, there was a kind of psychological push behind us. The expedition had with it three war correspondents. Besides these, there were members of the staff who drove a fluent and facile pen. As we entered the country, on tiptoe, the messages sent back to the Press were full of thrillingly mysterious anticipations. These developed into a succession of accounts of the wonders of the unknown land, as we got deeper into it, wherein the dictionary was sifted and winnowed for super-

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latives, and anyone who could devise a new phrase in mystic suggestiveness was pounced on and made to repeat it. The Press of India and England, and, through them, of much of the outside world, had been kept busy with letters and telegrams from the roof of the world. The excitement had reached its climax about a month before our half-way point, and showed the least little tendency to grow stale. By mid-August the Press was beginning to say, " Well, what are you going to do next ? " and to ask for news of Lhasa itself. Not to have gone there would have involved anti-climax ; and though this aspect was never, at the time, openly admitted, looking back on it now there seems little doubt that it was a strong factor in the permission we got to go forward.

The permission was welcome. But hardly had it been given when we of the expedition began to realise that we might possibly have been too confident in asking for it. In fact, we were up against time, and began to feel hurried. The expedition could not drag on for ever ; every delay meant a further stiffening of the resistance against us ; in addition, an unexpectedly mild past winter had allowed the uninterrupted use of the Jelap Pass for the very much smaller necessities of the initial advance. In the coming winter we could not count on the same good-fortune for traffic which had grown tenfold. The hour-glass-shaped problem of our line of communications—bulging supplies below, increasing force above, and the wasp-waist of that truly infernal Himalayan crossing which might at any moment close up and cut us off—lay unvoiced at the back of every argument in favour of hurry.

But how were we, with an equal distance to go, to duplicate the tedious strivings of the past nine months ? The country ahead might be expected to be at least as

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difficult as what lay behind us. It, and with it the road to Lhasa, was veiled in mystery ; none of us had traversed it ; no native of the country apparently knew—or, what amounted to the same thing, it was as much as his life was worth to tell us. There was only one point on which geographical knowledge was clear : somewhere astride our route we should find one of the major rivers of the world, the Tsangpo, which might (who knew ?) eventually be the Yangtse ; or might be the Salween, or the Mekong, or the Irrawaddy, or (and this was even more problematical) the Brahmaputra. Whichever it turned out to be, there would be no doubt of its size, and of the impossibility of bridging it in a land devoid of timber. How was it to be crossed ?

It is doubtful whether any enterprise in modern history has been confronted with a greater collection of puzzles, or had more excellent reasons for avoiding foolhardiness by turning back. It is, on the other hand, doubtful whether any expedition had as leader a man of the forceful character of ours, or one richer in resource. Certainly never was there a leader in whom his following had blinder or more affectionate trust.

Amundsen (stout fellow, may the waters lie lightly on him) said once that adventures simply did not happen to well-managed expeditions. Had he said it in 1904 we might have taken heart of grace in our difficulties and have foreseen an easy solution, since never had an expedition been as well-managed as was ours. But the most venturesome among us would hardly have anticipated the decision to which Younghusband came.

To understand it one must cast back a little. In many of the fights with the Tibetans, the forces which we had overcome had met us in the open, but in the close proximity of one of the village oases. As each in turn took its beat-

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ing, the survivors had retreated into the houses, whence they had been chivied and routed out till they had finally taken refuge in the main building of the village, in every case the solid and four-square monastery of the lamas. Here they usually fought it to a finish, involving their own dissolution and the pulverising of portions of the monastery by the gun-cotton wherewith, in the chronic absence of adequate artillery ammunition, the sappers frequently blew us a way in. We, therefore, were well acquainted with the normal interior economy of the monasteries; and in all of them we had found stores of the rough barley of the country, loose grain, unground, intractable and uninviting, and of problematical food value; nor did we try to use it, since by then our own supplies were working smoothly and efficiently. Those whose business it was to make inquiry into the habits and customs of the Tibetans had elicited the fact that of each yearly exiguous harvest of the village one quarter went direct to the monastery, in invariable excess of the requirements of the monks, who hoarded it, selfishly oblivious of the fact that the village population was habitually on short commons.

To those who remembered that the grain found with mummies in ancient Egyptian tombs not only preserved its food value, but was said still to have power of germination, it was a foregone conclusion that barley kept in the natural all-the-year-round cold storage of Tibet would not have deteriorated; and it was on this grain that our leader determined that we all, from himself down to the last mule of the transport, should live till we got to Lhasa. On the grain which we had left behind us? Not so; *that* would have involved bringing it forward and repeating in a minor degree the delays of the lines of communication. But, he argued, here were we in a holy

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land, among monks and monasteries ; we were advancing on the Holy of Holies ; *a fortiori*, the closer we got to Lhasa the holier would the land become, and the more frequent the monks and monasteries. Did he know it ? Was he told it ? He did not know it, neither did anybody tell him. For all he knew, the country over which we were to advance might, in its unknown difficulty and desolation, be bare of any human thing. He simply took his courage in his hands and banked all on what, to him, was a sound hypothesis ; nor did one of us for an instant question the wisdom of his decision. In the circumstances, a risk taken in the face of factors cumulatively unknown was as fine an act of courage as has been known in the records of frontier warfare.

In short, we, in sufficient force and equipment to make our arguments decisive, were to cut loose from our line of communications and to launch forth across the roof of the world, independent of help or support or of anyone to come to our assistance if things turned out wrong. Moses and the Children of Israel have been a commonplace to us from our childhood upwards ; but, in similar circumstances, Younghusband seems to have been allowed to repose, unemphasised, in the books which record his doings. At least the Children of Israel grumbled at their leadership and their short commons ; the Children of Israel, town-dwelling work-shy grousers at a simple job of work in bricks, *would*. But never was there a more cheerfully confident body of men and beasts (the mules, I am sure, caught the infection) than that which stepped out from Gyantse into the northward wilderness on that August morning of 1904.

Fifteen hundred men, three thousand mules, every man and beast laden to ultimate carrying power with every necessity from a cartridge to a box of medical comforts.

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Saving only food, we were a marching Army and Navy Stores, and, on the single file track, we measured eight miles from advanced guard to rearguard.

For the track was there, obvious and unmistakable. Narrow, lumpy, a heart-breaking thing on which to march, it ran very early into a succession of deep valleys and gorges where there was no room for the traveller to lose himself. In the very dark you could have found your way along it if only by touching the rocks of its surface smooth-polished by the unshod hooves of countless generations of beasts of burden.

On the first evening our confidence in our leader had exact confirmation. At twelve convenient miles from our starting-point the valley opened out. There, in the middle, stood a small village by the river bank ; and there, perched above it on the cliff side, the inevitable attendant monastery.

Down loads, off equipment, take shovels, sacks and unladen mules. In five minutes a caterpillar of men and beasts were crawling up the rock face to the *gompa*. Nor had we even to fight for what we wanted. Many of us had expected to be forced to do so, and plans had been laid therefor ; but, beyond lowering looks, no opposition met us. The Tibetans, it is true, concentrated for a final stand at the Kharo La Pass, where we were to meet them, but there is little doubt that their past experience of defeat prevented their wasting their strength on the minor defences which would have made our daily task far harder.

It would leave a gap in our understanding of the state of affairs were we not to digress for a moment and see the wherefore of the supplies on which we counted. Tibetan Buddhism has little in common with the teachings of the Master ; it is, in fact, nothing but a preaching of universal

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devildom ; not a vague and collective demonology, but with a specified and particularised devil appropriate to every place, action and motive of the simplest daily life. Between the all-pervading aggressive demons and the simple and hard-living people who fear them, the lama places himself as the one and only shield.

The protection afforded is the vain repetition of endless and meaningless formulæ and the observance of set ritual ; further, these things are of no value in themselves, but only as prescribed by, and with the direct sanction of, a lama. The devil-scaring prayer-flags, the walls composed of stones inscribed with a mystic formula, the whirling prayer-wheels driven by hand, by water, even by wind —all are valueless except by the intervention of the monks. For all this protection full payment is exacted ; not always, nor indeed often, in cash, but in the compulsory *corvée*, and the yearly contribution to the nearest monastery of one quarter of all produce, which keeps these self-indulgent parasites in the inertia which glowers from their sodden and soulless faces.

Whence originated the fiction that all this mumbo-jumbo business was devised to ' acquire merit ' it would be hard to say. Fictions arise from nowhere, and once risen die hard ; and this fiction has, so far, been the particular appanage of the debased and predatory lamaism which we found masquerading as Buddhism. It had its points, in that without it we should never have got to Lhasa, for each and every monastery contained in its underground chambers the accumulated grain contributions of the nearest village in amounts past belief. I, *moi qui vous parle*, have stood in the open doorway of an underground room and have held a lantern while men, armed with sacks and shovels, sank knee-deep in loose barley of which the packing action underfoot alone pre-

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vented their sinking up to the waist into it. Not once, but many times.

To show to what lengths this miserly hoarding could go, consider how, in one instance, the monks, having filled one of the underground rooms till it would hold no more, had built in the doorway with squared stone, had plastered the surface and, with elaborate care, had painted a fresco of their leading saint, Avalokitesvara, over the surface, surer protection than any lock or key in a land like Tibet. We had failed to find in the monastery as much as its size and importance would warrant, and were almost convinced by the improbable whines of the aldermanic abbot who swore that there was no more grain in the place, when suddenly I heard one of our *drabis*—a cheerful buccaneer with a nose for hidden stuff—calling, "Sahib, dekhiye sahib, *yih* kya mila!" I went along and found him pointing to where the rough plaster, which must have been years old, had dried and raised the slight outline of a doorway through the paint of the fresco. "Márun, sahib?" asked he gleefully. "*Ra*ther," says I. He whirled his pick, and great lumps of the plaster flaked off. After a while we got the stones loose, helped to some extent by Falstaff, whom, weeping in the background, we had enlisted as honorary member of the working party, and had made to do his whack in the labour. We cleared the débris, and out streamed a cascade of dust, mortar and bushel on bushel of golden grain—ceiling high.

I took the abbot by the folds of meat which he called the nape of his neck. I am not ashamed to say it. I took him by the nape of his lubberly neck, drove him down on his knees, and r-rubbed his nose in it. Avalokitesvara, indeed!

In short, here, teeming in the monasteries, was a hier-

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archy of privileged parasites; outside, in the villages, the hard-working peasants toiled with might and main to wring a thin subsistence from every rood of grudging soil which they could irrigate in an all-too-short summer. They denied themselves every comfort and limited their families by the practice of polyandry, that the gross monks should want for nothing. The few children born are the utmost that the land can support. It is not too much to say that I, who stood in the doorway, watched my men shovelling into sacks what was the direct equivalent of unborn babies.

We, as a rule, paid for anything which we took from the villages. We paid, for instance, for sheep, of which more anon. But our very souls would have revolted at the idea of paying to the monks one penny for what they not only would never miss but for what, indeed, they should never have possessed. We finished with a positive affection for the virile, truthful and (as we knew) hard-fighting villagers; but, to the end, not one of us could meet a lama in the path without the hand itching for something good and flexible, something flappish and whangable, wherewith to express an opinion.

"Acquiring merit?" Flat, systematic brigandage!

The sackfuls of grain, laden on mules and dumped in camp, were distributed to man and beast. Fine heartening stuff it was, and stuck to your ribs; full of vitamins, calories, nitrogen content and other chemical superlatives—if only you could get at them. But here was hard grain, none the softer for the climate in which it grew and the many years of its storage, and nothing wherewith to grind it. Alexander, Xenophon *et hoc genus omne*, had at least their quern-stones; but the grinding appliances of any Tibetan village would hardly have produced flour for a platoon. Fuel, we had some; of

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dried yak-dung, &c., a good deal; the grains were parboiled, pounded between stones, worried about and all but stamped on; and they went down somehow. But then the circus began. The first incautious hearty meal by hungry men, and two hours afterwards . . . Ooooh! . . . *WOW!* . . . The only members of the expedition who could have had any experience of hard grains were the Sikhs, and they knew the stuff only in the shape of the wholemeal *atta* of the Punjab, in itself indigestible enough to those unused to it; but the Gurkhas, rice-eaters always, took it bitter bad.

In twenty-four hours the hospital had issued its last scrap of Epsom salts and the pills were running low. The doctors, alarmed at the prospect of the expedition entering Lhasa bent double and groaning, dashed about giving advice, the gist of which was to eat little and to chew that little thirty-two times (if memory serves) *more Gladstoni*, before swallowing.

The mules, as one might expect, added one more conjuring trick to their repertoire by wolfing the stuff in half-pound mouthfuls, and in being the better, the fatter and the more frisky for it. Squeal; kick your neighbour in the ribs; raise nose, voice and a forest of ears, and *ask for more!* Those almost incredible mules . . .

Later, we learnt to forage the grain-stores and swop the contents back to the monks for an equivalent weight in *tsamba* barley-meal, in which the food value was largely mixed with grit, or with anything that the incessant wind chose to blow on to the open-air threshing floors; 'fine confused feeding.' The tsamba had to be extracted from hiding-places. Similarly, the villagers gladly gave up the small quantity of tsamba they possessed for double or treble weight of grain; thus we evened up matters between them and the monks whom they so

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blindly allowed to terrorise them. In the end, it was practically the mules alone who had barley *au naturel*, the men drawing meal and barley alternately. The meal we made into a porridge and, by the addition of more dried meal to the mess, made fairly portable but nauseous-looking cricket balls of the stuff. These balls were carried in the haversack and nibbled *en route*, the full value of the rib-binder then being got for the minimum of digestive trouble.

Then there were the sheep; thousands of them. We left Gyantse with a sizable herd; and this, somehow, increased instead of diminishing as we went along. Sheep are universal in Tibet; their wool is a fundamental necessity in the Arctic cold; their meat hangs in mummified carcasses, sometimes for years, before being eaten; on the southern frontiers they become beasts of burden in the salt and borax trade, each sheep carrying thirty pounds across the passes. How they are fed, or by whom, was a mystery. Ask the yak. But we drove a flock of thousands. Long before dawn the flock would be on the move, quite independent of protection, and driven by volunteers from the ranks. The hope, persisting to the last, was that the sheep would get to the next camping ground before we did; a hope as invariably falsified. For, somewhere about mid-day and always, seemingly, at the worst and narrowest part of the route, the advanced guard would come up with them; they going one mile an hour, we three. Then, for what seemed like hours, men, horses, mules waded knee-deep in a maa-ing, baa-ing, reeking mass of obstinately obstructive wool. Sheep in a drove, when interfered with, move in headlong panic rushes; or stop dead, crowd together into an impenetrable lump and face all ways at once; and these sheep were no exception to the rule. They added miles, in

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sheer fatigue, to our daily march, and we grew to hate the sight of them. When they got moving, hours before daylight, the volleys of baa-ing would wake the camp and keep it awake till legitimate 'réveillé.' The Tibetan sheep's baa-power is what you would expect where mother calls to young, or young to mother, in a land where, whether up-wind or down-wind, the gale sweeps sound from your lips as soon as uttered. The Tibetan sheep's utter brainlessness did not need the wealth of varied description it got at mid-day, from fifteen hundred leg-hampered men, to make it apparent. The Tibetan sheep's power of obstinately withstanding any attempt to hurry it was daily driven in on successive rearguards who, dropping with exhaustion, shoo'd and hustled the last of their charges into camp hours after everyone else was fed and bedded.

The Tibetan sheep was, as it were, mutton. It was also, as it were, violin strings, and piano wire, and india-rubber, and leather, and what is left over when you have chewed (and chewed, and re-chewed, and finally and definitely thrown away) a piece of string. It added grey hairs to our heads, and subtracted years from our lives. It shortened our normally excellent tempers, and brought about ridiculous situations; the most ridiculous lives in the memory as the sight of a stately battery mule, tall, well-groomed, and all the taller for a 230-lb. topload of khaki-painted gun—the tall mule in a narrow part of the track bogged to the hocks in a seething mass of struggling ovine brainlessness which maa'd and baa'd and maa'd again; and the mule still dignified, without a twitch to his ears or the beginnings of a lift to a sorely-tempted heel. Once more, and a dozen times a day, I take off my hat to the transport mule. But, with my hat in one hand and my stomach in the other, I sweep a

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deep and stately bow to the mule of the pack-artillery. Of a truth there is nothing quite like him in this world.

Why the Tibetans never descended on our unprotected mutton in the hours when it preceded our advanced guard and lagged miles behind our main body was always a mystery to us. But, looking back, it seems probable that the same reason held, in this case, as in their non-interference with our foraging in their monasteries; they were concentrating every man and gun for the defence of the Kharo La, that high pass to which we have already referred. Ideally defensible, determination would have made it impregnable.

Determination we had every right to expect of them. By every human law, there should have been one last huge and spectacular battle wherein the Tibetans, as a nation, would have risen up to bar our way to the Holy of Holies, dying in heaps in defence of their monks. Fact is, their *morale* was gone. Horde after fresh horde had been turned against us, the survivors of each, after bitter battle, to dissolve in fragments which, in the absence of any workable military system, could not be reassembled, but scattered far and wide carrying exaggerated tales of what they had been up against. The levies which tried to defend the Kharo La against us fought under the overhanging shadow of persistent past failures. Above all, they had been utterly deserted by the cowardly monks who should have been the first to lay down their lives in defence of their Sacred City. Individually brave, the Tibetan looks to his lamas for guidance and leadership in any circumstances; setting aside all question of the anathema of life-taking by a lama, the gross monks were the last people in the world to risk their skins. For, where an ideal to be upheld and fought for is concerned,

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none know better than the lamas of Tibet how many yards of tongue go to one cheek.

The fight at the Kharo La, therefore, had nothing but its almost incredible difficulty of terrain wherewith to puzzle us; and that with a grim and peremptory viciousness we waltzed through its defences, I ascribe to the concentrated dyspepsia born of barley-meal and the aforesaid mutton; tempers were at vanishing point, and we swept the Tibetans out of *sangar* and wall, cave and glacier-moraine, as we would have swept the Prussian Guard had they been there. In the next world war the storm troops will be battalions of dyspeptics selected from the conscripted nation; for weeks before zero hour we shall feed them on pounded barley and stringy mutton; and when they go over the top, nor man nor beast, wire nor heavy artillery, shall stand against them.

V.

We've been digressing. We found our expedition at the end of the first day's march, with every guess and prophecy of our leader fulfilled. Our trust in him hardly allowed room for surprise at the patness of the event and the increasing ease to our difficulties, for, day by day, just what he foresaw turned out to be the case. Monasteries, sometimes without but more often with small villages in close attendance, multiplied as we progressed. Not always, naturally, were they the exact distance apart that we wished to march. Indeed, on two occasions there was no monastery at all, and we lived on our margin of reserves. But presently they grew so thick that we could afford to skip one and go on to what we felt confident would be another.

Presently also (as a doctor once said to the writer,

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" the human body being a weird and wonderful thing ") we grew in a way accustomed to the tummy-twisting diet, and ceased to hate our meals in prospect. In a year's time, I am convinced, we might even have learnt to grow fat, as the mules very early grew fat, on the heavy nitrogenous stuff, for there is no doubt that the Tibetan, living in a land such as his, backed a winner when he concentrated on barley.

Of the fight at the Kharo La we have spoken. Of the crossing of the Tsangpo—that combination of the luck of good enterprises with the ineptitude of the Tibetans who abandoned to us the barges of their ferry—we will not speak. For it cost us the life of one, Bretherton, in whose hands had lain the working out of every tangled problem of transport and supply necessitated by the wise and courageous decisions of Younghusband.

Bretherton.

Kindly, courteous, infinitely adequate, the death of any three other officers of his rank in the expedition would have been, by comparison, a lesser loss to us. The gloom of the catastrophe still hung over us when, five days later, we turned a corner of the mountains and saw, far out on a wide plain, the gilded finials of the Dalai Lama's palace and the squat grey roofs of Lhasa.

Two hundred miles had we come from the half-way point; through mountain gorges, over open plains, across high passes, round the borders of unknown lakes, and across one of the major rivers of the world. Incidentally, we held the world's record for altitude in a successful battle; not flat, but up-ended between 16,400 and 19,000 feet. Every yard of our journey had been unknown, no yard of it mapped or described. Heel and toe at our best pace we had come, heads up and chests out and a straw between our teeth, and all at the bidding

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of one man who *knew* (may there be born to England more men with such knowledge!) that he could lead us successfully to our goal and that we would follow him; and that no man of us, in a hard and stony land, but would have done his utmost bidding if only to give him a moment's comfort.

VI.

In six weeks of patient persistence Younghusband worried a complete and comprehensive treaty out of the Tibetans. Their leaders, ecclesiastical and civil, fought him point by point. At every turn they were simply worn down by the firmness of a man of the very existence of whose type they had previously had no conception. Throughout it all, he never once had to threaten the destruction of Lhasa. Undoubtedly the power to do it lay in our hands; equally undoubtedly, the Tibetans knew it. But it speaks volumes for Younghusband—he, the very embodiment of a sahib's decent feeling when dealing with a people beaten to their knees—that the *ultima ratio regum* was never even suggested.

A few days later we started homewards, the treaty in our pocket.

The way home was easy. In a peculiar way, a force victorious finds things made light for it where the same force struggling to its destination is up against everything. It may have been harvest time, or it may have been the prestige of success, but all sorts of good things seemed to appear from nowhere; turnips, I remember, among other things.

When we rejoined the line of communications at Gyantse, Capua lost its place in history. For not only were the comparative luxuries of a soldier's normal diet awaiting us, but the accumulation of good things which

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had streamed steadily up to the head of the line all the time we were away, also were there.

Our mess-cook's first effort, under the new conditions, sticks in the memory. He must have thought deeply before the inspiration of what was the most solid and stickjaw thing imaginable flashed across his brain to be fed to sahibs who, had he known it, had been day-dreaming for weeks past on jellies, beaten eggs, whipped cream and other ethereal levities.

Bacon roly-poly !

Could one face a mouthful of it to-day ?

But, in those golden days of our youth, with digestions hardened by what we had undergone, a full meal of the deadly stuff was followed only by dreams of fireflies, where, three months before, we should have dreamt of dragons.

. . . . . .

Two days later we set out to make light of the downward journey. The old landmarks flicked by with an almost homey sensation as we cast the miles behind us. But the wisdom of our leader to brook no delay in advancing on Lhasa was apparent as we neared the passes. For forty-eight hours the approaching winter snowed the whole force up, solid ; and we just struggled out as the north closed down behind us in leaden cloud and blizzard after blizzard.

And there lay India, infinitely big and flat, infinitely clear in the rain-washed air of an approaching cold weather, a land of incredible distances as seen from the Himalayan divide.

And there, too, this scribe saw Younghusband at the top of the pass, looking southward, with who could guess what of thankfulness in his clean and steadfast heart. There and then it was borne in on us that the reality of

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leadership lies not, as so many of us suppose, in subtle manœuvre or in brilliant battle, but in sheer dogged personality and the confident power of organisation; and when, in addition, the leader commands the faith and affection of every man of his following, what, indeed, shall withstand him?

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III.

A QUIET DAY IN TIBET.

GRRR—RR—R comes from the Blue Dog with no other name, followed by a yap and the pattering of feet on the floor. Then three tame burhel enter my bedroom. They have slept on the roof of some shed, the nearest approach to the rocky ground which they haunt when wild, and at the first sign of dawn they are stirring. A cold nose is pushed into my face, effectually waking me, and I hear one of them drinking out of my water-jug. The dogs, although great friends and, indeed, playmates of these wild sheep, resent their entering the house, and while I am quieting them I hear a sound of broken glass. The ram has leaped on to the window-sill, and in doing so put a horn through a pane. This somewhat alarms the sheep, and they move off to do some mischief among the flower-beds.

I lie in bed waiting for my servant to bring me the morning tea, and listening to the chirp of the sparrows and the curious 'hooping' of the hoopoes who have nests in the turf wall of the house. The latter are great friends, and have introduced me to their four youngsters, whose heads are perpetually looking out of a hole in the wall, but whose beaks and crests have not yet grown to the length that gives the parents their curious hammer-headed appearance.

It is a beautiful day in October, and I am one of the

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three British officers at the most advanced Agency which the Indian Government maintains in Tibet. The first question that presents itself is, "What is to be done to-day?" At sunrise this morning the post started, to the accompaniment of a jingle of bells, on its hundred-mile *trek* to the next post-office on the road to India, and no more letters can arrive for four days. The obvious answer to the query has just presented itself—"Let us kill something," when I recollect that this is a polo day. My mind being thus at ease, I doze until I hear my servant arrive. In any other country he would cause some remark. Dorje Pentzog is small in stature, with a very Mongolian countenance set between two large turquoise earrings, and wears his hair in a queue in the Chinese fashion. He is followed by a troop of dogs, each of whom receives a biscuit. The Blue Dog, an Australian greyhound, is rather sorry for himself and moves stiffly, for yesterday "Butch," the tame panther, gave him a playful scratch on the tail. "Bob," the old English sheep-dog, is, perhaps, the most boisterous of them all, while "Peach," also a greyhound, and the essence of laziness, looks beseechingly from the chair where she lies and asks me to throw her biscuit there, as it is too much to expect the mother of two hungry puppies to walk to my bedside at that hour in the morning. Then a quarrel has to be settled between "Apso," a Tibetan dog like a Skye terrier on long legs, and the Blue Dog, caused by two English spaniel pups who charge clumsily about, and in their eagerness upset everyone's temper. There is also the Brown Dog, a mongrel greyhound with no heart, who is as cunning as a cat when coursing, and who stands in the background, lacking the pluck to thrust his way forward among the hungry crowd. We must not forget the wolf-like Tibetan hunting-dog, who is a new arrival, and at present is so wild that he will not

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enter the house, preferring the nomadic tent life to which he is accustomed. After each of the nine dogs has been given a biscuit, they are led away to be brushed, leaving their master to dress. What is that noise varying between the squalling of a thousand cats and the plaintive crying of a baby? I go up and feed the litter of snow leopard cubs which has just arrived. They are too young to rear, and though I feed them on raw meat juice and various things prescribed by the doctor, they only survive a few days. These animals do considerable harm to the flocks, and the people dig out the young and exhibit them among the sheep-owners, who, glad to see these beautiful marauders exterminated, pay a small sum in reward for their capture.

Then breakfast, which is made interesting by the sight of three half-tamed wolves, who stand in the French window leading to the garden and hungrily watch each morsel that is eaten. At last "William," bolder than "Clarence" or "Percy," steps into the room, but immediately repents his rashness, and all three scamper to the farthest corner of the garden, only to return warily. "William" again enters, and this time, much to the horror of his two companions, actually comes up to the table and makes a ravenous grab at a bone which I give him, nearly taking my hand with it into his capacious mouth. He immediately rushes into the garden, where he has to defend the fruits of his boldness against his two more timorous companions, until to keep the peace I get up and give a bone to each of the others. The garden is a curious place and hardly worthy of the name, as it is the home of the three wolves, who litter it with bones. Such flowers as remain are destroyed by "Butch," who loves to stalk them when they are swaying in the wind, pouncing on them with all the playfulness of a kitten.

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The corners of the mud wall are scored with the foot-marks of various animals, the wolves continually trying to get over it, while the burhel are always climbing in and out. It is a fine sight to see one of the latter jump out of a ten-foot enclosure. He rushes at the wall near one of the corners as if he meant to knock it down, then leaps lightly at the face of it like a circus girl going through a paper hoop. All four feet touch the perpendicular side, and for a second gravity seems to be defied. Then a kick, and he turns in the air and bounds gracefully to the top of the other wall of the right angle.

After breakfast there is always a certain amount of business to be transacted. A mule-driver wants leave to go to his home ; a postal-carrier's wife is ill, and he wishes to go to some holy Lama to purchase a charm ; a letter has been received from a Tibetan friend asking for photographic chemicals or phonograph records. Such matters attended to, we stroll round and look at the polo ponies which are to take part in the game. They are curious little animals, as shaggy as bears, and varying in height from 11½ to 13½ hands. Over one stall is a rough picture of a man on a horse surrounded by Tibetan writing. This is a charm to frighten the demon which is bewitching the animal, and no doubt a cure ascribed as much to it as to the more scientific remedies administered. Then we wander into the garden, sown with English vegetable seeds, which, at 13,000 feet above sea-level, is for the greater part of the year merely a brown frozen patch of earth. While I am here a messenger arrives from the local Tibetan officials politely asking when it will be convenient for me to see them. I reply that I shall be playing polo this morning, but that I hope they will come and watch the game and stay to lunch after it is over. We then proceed to the polo ground, where all the ponies are

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waiting to be divided among the various players. The latter are a curious medley. An ex-sergeant of the Royal Horse Artillery proves an invaluable stand-by, as also does one of the telegraph sergeants, who, though an infantry man, acquits himself manfully, and makes up for bad riding by fearlessness and straight hitting. Then there is a detachment of Indian Mounted Infantry, and last, but by no means least, the Tibetans who are employed in the Agency in various capacities. The game commences and proceeds without accident, much to everybody's surprise, for the rules are obeyed but slightly, and bad fouls are of frequent occurrence.

The menagerie previously described is always brought down to the polo ground, where I feed the various beasts and handle them to overcome their fear of human beings. Besides the burhel there are two young kyang, the wild ass of Tibet, a young Tibetan gazelle and a full-grown serow (a species of wild goat). The last named was captured in the forests of the Upper Himalayas; he is wild and savage and quite unapproachable. A young one of the same species has recently escaped, owing to our rule that no animal shall be tied up except for a few days when first obtained. That unpleasant experience undergone, the young serow preferred freedom to pleasant well-fed captivity.

At last as I come in from a game I meet the two Tibetan officials, a monk and a layman. Dressed in pleasingly coloured silks, they are mounted on gaily bedecked mules, and are preceded by several servants. All the mules have round their necks strings of bells, which in the distance make pleasant music, but which one would think must be very wearying to the rider. We greet each other, and they courteously ask if I am not very tired after playing, inwardly marvelling, no doubt, that I take so much trouble

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for what to them seems no reasonable end. After effusive compliments on both sides, we sit down in the tent pitched for shelter from sun or wind, and I offer them wine, which the layman accepts with avidity, while the monk regretfully declines, as he is not allowed to touch strong liquor. The layman is the proud possessor of three wounds received when fighting against us in 1904, and playfully scans the polo ponies, searching for a particularly fine dun of his, which he maintains fell into our hands when he himself was shot. He bears no ill-will, and treats the whole thing as a joke, saying he is sure I have his pony, but that I hide it when he comes to see me.

While we are watching the game, one of the young kyang suddenly rushes on to the ground: as her foster-mother is playing she has broken loose to join in the fun, and succeeds wonderfully well in getting in everyone's way. Just before the last game is finished we see a pony roll over: it looks a nasty fall, and we are more than horrified to see that the victim is our Tibetan cook! What is to be done for lunch? and company too! However, he is soon up and galloping home to see how the joint is getting on.

After the last game we stroll back to the house, and then for half an hour I am closeted with the Tibetan officials, who have probably come to talk about the arrangements for supplying the Agency with fodder and fuel, or some similar matter. Great patience is required in listening to long speeches which could easily be condensed into a few words; but the first lesson to be learnt in dealing with these people is never to be in a hurry, and always to allow them to have their say, however long-winded they may be. Everything being satisfactorily settled, we go down to lunch. This is eaten to the music of a gramophone blaring out Tibetan songs, which, although to our

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ears somewhat trying, please our guests immensely in spite of their having heard them all many times before. During lunch the monk explains to the doctor that he has a pain in his back, and inquires whether whisky would be a good cure. The tactful doctor rises to the occasion, and says that whisky is what he invariably prescribes for this complaint, and indeed it was only yesterday that he was obliged to administer some to me for a similar attack. The monk looks inquiringly at me for confirmation, and when I dilate on the relief immediately obtained therefrom, he looks a little suspicious. He is half inclined to think that we have seen through his ruse, but we turn the conversation, and, his conscience quieted, he becomes quite convivial. After lunch a photograph is taken of the party, with the servants standing behind, and I have dozens of such groups, as the entertainment is not considered complete without one.

Before the departure of our guests I offer to take one of them for a short drive. The vehicle is a low-seated trap just imported from India, but unfortunately no harness has arrived as yet: however, I have improvised some with raw hide, and we start off down the stony road and across the bridge. My guest and all the onlookers are vastly amused; the tears roll down their faces at the laughable idea of sitting in a chair and making a pony pull it along. There are no wheeled vehicles in Tibet, and these people had only seen the rough ekkas which were used for transport during the expedition in 1904. Their surprise at the motor-car imported by my predecessor had subsided, though they were always glad to surround and stare at it. For sheer entertainment, however, let them gaze on the white man's new invention going down the road. After a spin of half a mile we return, but as we are crossing the narrow bridge, innocent

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of parapets, it occurs to me that the pony is farther off than he should be. I am puzzling over this phenomenon when suddenly the shafts slip clear of the harness, the trap tilts back, and we are lying on it with our heads hanging over the rushing water and our feet pointing to the skies. Meanwhile the pony, who " never in this wise had treated been before," tears the reins out of my hand and gallops home. The Tibetan groom, with great presence of mind, closes the hood of the trap so that we cannot see the awful doom that awaits us if we stir, though the danger is no farther off on that account. With some difficulty we are rescued, my Tibetan friend in a terrified condition, and I have never been able to persuade him to come for a drive again, even behind the best Cawnpore harness.

Our guests now depart, but just as they are leaving a messenger arrives to say that a Chinese official wishes to see me, and he comes to tea. He is a thorough gentleman and a very pleasant man to deal with, but, unfortunately, he speaks nothing but Chinese, and all conversation has to be carried on in Tibetan through his interpreter. While I am thus engaged there is a rattle at the door-handle, and a small face peers through the glass: this is the small monkey who has spent the day where the ponies' corn is being crushed, and who always comes in to tea with both pouches bulging with grain. I admit him, and he sits on the mantelpiece making happy, contented noises as he is fed.

When our Chinese guest has gone it is about sunset, and we all three walk out to the little pond, some half a mile distant, to wait for the geese and duck which frequently come in great numbers at this time of day during the months of October and November. As we approach, a flight of teal arrives, but, seeing us, moves off without settling. As we are wading to a small island we hear the

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distant 'honk' of geese, and hurriedly crouch down behind a low wall which we have built. Presently a sharp eye will detect in the west a thin horizontal line, which gradually resolves into a long row of dots, and finally into a flock of a dozen geese. Not yet! Wait! Now! No! Now! and six reports are heard in quick succession. Three geese have fallen, and two of them drop at our feet, splashing us till we are soaked. If we are fortunate we may bag a dozen geese and half as many ducks in a few minutes at this time of the evening. It is fascinating sport, and one is tempted to stay on after dark, when only the whistle of wings can be heard and nothing can be seen.

We return in time for dinner. This is a quiet meal, and the evening is usually spent in doing any office work which may be required. Life is not always like this, however, for every fifth day the post leaves, and then our time must be devoted to correspondence. During the whole of the summer there is, of course, no small game shooting, but burhel and gazelle can always be found on the neighbouring hills, and a day spent in search of them is seldom fruitless. Then the larger wild sheep, known to sportsmen as the *Ovis ammon*, can be got within two or three days' journey; and I was once fortunate enough to bag three in as many days' absence from home. A less strenuous but more interesting amusement in the summer is collecting the eggs of the various rare birds which inhabit this little-known region. In the spring months all enjoyment is spoilt by the wind and by dust-storms of daily occurrence, while in the rains the ground is too slippery for polo. These are our dark days in Tibet, when perhaps we hanker after the civilisation that seems so far off from our outlandish plateau.

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IV.

THE PEOPLE OF THE CAMEL.[1]

WITH the exception of the Ma'adan, or Marsh-dwellers, the tribes of Mesopotamia fall into two broad divisions—the People of the Desert and the People of the Fields. From these divisions come the townsmen, fortunately few in number, for on the whole the town atmosphere seems to stifle all the good and encourage all the bad qualities of the Arab character.

The People of the Desert scorn cultivation in any form. They are camel-owners, breeders of fine horses, keepers of vast flocks of sheep and goats, which roam the wide plains in search of grazing. Fierce and proud, they adhere rigidly to strict tribal custom. Intolerant of others, yet renowned for their hospitality, they live the simple patriarchal life.

The People of the Fields are poor and hard-working, but as a rule cheerful and contented, easy as to their morals, grateful for any small service done them. Oppressed by their shaikhs, and despised by the People of the Desert, they eke out a precarious livelihood as growers of wheat and barley, or perhaps toil in the moist paddy-fields, or cultivate vegetables in a narrow strip of land running alongside a river or canal.

[1] Subsequently published in 'Haji Rikkan, Marsh Arab,' St James's Library, Chatto & Windus.

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Yet they too were once People of the Desert, until, driven forth from their pasture lands at some stage of their history by a great drought or other disaster, they were led, like the Children of Israel, to exchange, in the words of Professor Myres, " their nomad, pastoral, patriarchal life, with its simple needs and economies, and the almost complete seclusion from the troubles of the world, for a Land of Promise, which, like all the paradises of the Nearer East, only yields its fruit to arduous toil and anxious ' thought for the morrow ' ; where the man without capital is ruined by a late frost ; where hired labour is the sole alternative to slavery ; where even the ' good land ' can only be won by fighting, and held by intrigue and oppression of the conquered, ' hewers of wood and drawers of water.' "

This gradual change from a wandering to a settled life is still going on, and can be seen in many of the tribes of Mesopotamia to-day. It is with such tribes, still pastoral, but nevertheless tied to their crops and therefore only half-nomadic, that these stories, based on actual occurrences during the British Occupation, have to do.

Calling themselves, and fiercely proud of being, " the People of the Camel," yet, because they have tasted of the fruits of cultivation, they are doomed, in the course of a few short generations, to become as the tillers of the soil whom they now so heartily despise.

THE FATHER OF BUNDS.

Haji Mohammed bin Ali awaited the decision of the Political Officer. His fine old face was seamed and lined with countless wrinkles, and his neatly trimmed beard was white with age ; but in the eyes which looked out under his bushy brows was the clear strong gaze of one

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used to wide spaces, a steadfast brightness undimmed by years.

" I am in thy hands," he said simply. " Thou knowest that my honour is at stake ; a guest robbed in my madhif——"

His words were cut short by the bursting open of the office door. Pushing aside the two farrashes who would have restrained him, a tall angry figure strode in, his brown aba streaming behind him, and the checked red kafiah on his head pushed to one side. Before he reached the office table, he had burst into a torrent of excited speech.

Old Mohammed rose to his feet, and stood uncertain whether to go or stay ; for this was his overlord, the great Shaikh Najim, ruler of all the tribes of the Albu Hassain. What could have happened to render him oblivious of all the formalities of an interview with the Hakim, to make him thus forgetful of all his dignity and state ?

" Sahib," cried the newcomer, his voice quivering with anger, " before all my tribesmen I was turned away from the bund—called ignorant and of no account—bidden depart as one having no knowledge ! I, who am called the Father of Bunds, who since I was no taller than my youngest son Zamil——"

A short middle-aged man who had followed the shaikh into the room now touched his elbow, said a few words in his ear, and led him to a bench.

It was his mullah, a member of a class of Arab society whose power, in the next generation, is doomed to wane. At present he is indispensable to his master, for only in very rare cases can a shaikh conduct his own correspondence. In the past, when inter-tribal warfare was rather the rule than the exception, a man might be a powerful shaikh one day and a landless fugitive the next.

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He had no spare time for the education of his sons in any arts save those of war, and the young Arabs of noble birth grew up, from the time they were able to sit a horse, trained to wield the sword rather than the pen. Should the British leave to-morrow, however, the Occupation has already ensured one thing—that the boys who are the shaikhs of the future have all, during the five years' security and peace, learned to read and write their own language. Meanwhile, the mullah, in his capacity of secretary and confidant to the shaikh, often possesses considerable power, and is sometimes, with good reason, more feared among the tribesmen than the shaikh himself.

Of the two men now before the Political Officer, however, there could be no question as to which was the ruling spirit. In spite of his sixty years, the tall commanding figure of Najim, his deep-set eyes and proud stern features, showed plainly that Mullah Sulman might be a trusted clerk, even a chosen mouthpiece, but could not be more. He knew, nevertheless, that his master was a man of deeds, not words; and now, thinking quite rightly that the Political Officer had some difficulty in following Najim's incoherent exclamations, took up the tale himself.

The mullah was, emphatically, a man of words. His periods were long and his language flowery, and the story promised in his hands to be a lengthy one. Shaikh Najim, wrapping his aba more closely round him, sat grim and silent while the tale of his grievance was slowly unfolded.

Briefly, it was this. Every year in the spring, when the snows melt on the northern mountains, the river rushes down in flood, swollen to many times its ordinary volume, and heavy with silt. If it were not for the earthen bunds which the Arab builds along the banks to protect his crops, many miles of land on either side of the river-bed would be submerged. Only too often the rushing water finds a

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weak place in the bund and breaks a way through ; and this had now happened at Al Juzra. At once Najim had collected his tribesmen, brought up the material for repairing the breach, and himself ridden to the spot to direct operations. Then on the scene had appeared a 'Muhendis,' by which term the Arab designates anyone possessing engineering experience ; in this case it was an Irrigation official, full of youthful zeal and recently acquired text-book knowledge. Ignoring Najim, he ordered the tribesmen to leave the broken bund, and set to work on building a new one farther back from the river.

Najim expostulated, ordered the men to go on with their work, said (with perfect truth) that in the days of the Muhendis' grandfather he had been responsible for this bund, and that for five-and forty years he had repaired it whenever necessary.

"Much more said his honour the shaikh," continued the mullah, and the Political Officer, knowing Najim of old, smiled to himself.

But the harangue was wasted on the Muhendis. Through an interpreter he addressed the angry shaikh somewhat as follows :—

"My dear old fellow, I don't understand a word you say ; but as you obviously know nothing about bunds, perhaps you will kindly clear out and leave me to run the show."

The interpreter did not mince matters. Speechless with rage, Najim turned on his heel, mounted his pony, and set out straightway on the two days' journey to lay his case before the Political Officer.

"Before all my people was it said," muttered the old shaikh. "I, who am called the Father of Bunds——"

The Political Officer knew better than to attempt to

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minimise the affair in Najim's eyes, or to treat it as anything but a serious matter. He promised to look into the case himself, and the old man left the office somewhat mollified.

The Political Officer turned to Haji Mohammed, who had been patiently waiting for the settlement of his own less exalted business.

"Is he indeed known among you as the Father of Bunds?" he asked.

"Aye, he has long been called by that name," replied Haji Mohammed, "but many there be who call him Abu Mayitain, the Father of two Dead Men."

"A strange title! How came he by it?"

"That will I tell to your honour," said Mohammed, tucking up his feet under him on the high bench, and settling down to his tale with a sigh of pleasurable anticipation.

In the black hair tents of the desert, where narrative by word of mouth has still to serve for novel, drama and newspaper, the post of story-teller is an honourable one; and the simple, almost Biblical language, the dignified and restrained gestures of the old tribesman, brought the breadth and freshness of wind-swept spaces into the dingy office.

"In the year after the death of Ghadhban in the fight against Kharaibat," he began, "my sister's husband desired to lease the lands of Khazainah from Shaikh Najim. Now this is good rich land, and free from salt; but wellnigh every year the river overflows its banks and breaks through the bunds, flooding the greater part. For this reason the land was leased out for only a quarter its value, and Abdulla, the husband of my sister, offered the sum of two hundred liras to the shaikh. But Najim was in need of money; for the last two years the crops

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had been poor, his revenue was heavily in arrears, and the Turks were pressing for payment. He would not lease the land for less than six hundred liras.

" ' Were I but sure that my crops would be safe from flood,' said Abdulla, ' willingly would I pay this sum, for the land is good land. But thou knowest that not more than one year in seven is the harvest safe.'

" ' This,' said Najim, ' shall be the seventh year.'

" ' Dost know the rise of the river before ever the rains begin to fall or the high snows to melt upon the hills ? ' asked Abdulla.

" ' This year no floods shall cover the land of Khazainah. I, Najim bin Musa, have said it. I will build a great bund that shall safeguard the crops, let the river rise as it will.'

" ' But if the bund should break ?'

" ' I have spoken,' said Najim. And he swore a great oath, by Allah and by his Prophet and by his own honour, that the land should be safe that year.

" So Abdulla took the land, and at the first rain he ploughed and sowed, and the young wheat stood green as far as the edge of the desert.

" Shaikh Najim built the bund of trodden earth faced with ' ghimir,' [1] the work of many tribesmen for many days. Then in due course, as is its custom in the spring, the river began to rise. It reached the level of its banks, and crept above them ; it reached the broad strong bund of Najim's building, and lapped against it. And Najim, mindful of his oath, set a watchman that night upon the bund, telling him that if he slept and any harm befell, he would cut off his right hand.

" The watchman was Mehdi bin Lazim, and till midnight he walked upon the bund, keeping good watch. He

[1] Brushwood of camel-thorn, tamarisk, &c.

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saw that it was strong, far higher and broader than it was their custom to build ; and as the night was cold, he gave thanks to Allah that his shaikh had builded well, and sat down to rest behind the bund. Thus it chanced that he fell asleep. And while he slept the wind changed, and lashed the swift-flowing river into waves, which beat angrily against the high bund. Now it was newly built, and the earth was still loosely packed, and soon the water found a weak place where a rat had dug her hole.

" At first broke through a thin trickle, like milk from a camel's udder ; but Mehdi slept on, and saw it not. When at the first light of dawn his eyes opened, he saw a swift fierce stream pouring through the bund ; and he was afraid, for he felt the knife already at his right hand. Hastening to his village, he collected his family and his household goods, and crossing the river took shelter with Shaikh Tahir, Najim's enemy.

" The sun had been up an hour before the news reached Shaikh Najim ; and he cursed Mehdi and all his forebears, and sent messengers to bring him in. At the same time he sent others to call in all his tribesmen, with their women-folk and their beasts of burden. But Najim, with his brothers and all the men of his 'nizil,' went quickly to the place, and found my sister's husband gazing at the breach, while his women cast earth upon their heads and beat their breasts.

" ' O protected of Allah,' said Abdulla, ' is this the fulfilment of thine oath ? '

" ' I will pluck out the eyes of Mehdi, who has thus betrayed me ! ' said Najim (and thou knowest, O Hakim, that he is terrible in anger).

" ' His eyes, and the eyes of all his family, will not save my crops,' said Abdulla. ' It will take many days to close

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this breach ; and two days and two nights of this '—he pointed to the surging water—' will ruin all.'

" ' Thy crops are not yet lost,' answered Najim. ' Am I to swear again the oath I swore, by Allah and by his Prophet and by mine own honour, that the land should be safe ? Nay, but now I swear, by the good grain that thou shalt surely reap at harvest, the breach shall be closed before to-morrow's sunset.'

" He sent more messengers, to bring in even the old men and the old women, the young boys and the young girls. And those who were already assembled he divided into parties, the women to cut camel-thorn and tamarisk, and the rough grass that grows beside the river, the men to bring earth ; only the strongest men he kept to stem the flow of the water.

" Of these, half stood on one side of the breach and half on the other ; and at a word from the shaikh they rushed into the water, turning their backs to the current, each man staying himself on his ' mishah,' [1] which he thrust into the ground before him. Thus they tried to check the rush of the water ; but the current was fierce and strong, and the quivering ' mishahs ' showed how hard the men had to struggle to keep their footing. In the middle, where the stream was swiftest, not a man could stand for more than a moment ; one after another was whirled off his feet by the rushing water. At that time, Najim was some thirty years of age, and at the height of his strength, taller and broader than any man there. Throwing off his garments, he seized a ' mishah ' and dashed into the water, calling upon his brothers to follow him. In the middle of the breach he stood upright, staying the stream with his back as the others did ; thus the chain of men met across the breach, and the rush of water was

[1] Spade with small head and six-foot handle.

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stayed enough for the other parties to begin hastily to make ring bunds, one close to the breach, the other farther back and stronger, lest the first should break.

" Bundles of the ' ghimir ' brought by the women were laid down, and on them earth was heaped. Some dug it as best they might from beneath the water, others farther afield, two working together to fill an aba, which they would then carry by the corners to the bund ; more men formed a line, passing clods of earth from hand to hand.

" Night came ; by Allah's mercy the moon was full, and the work went on. The living barrier still held back the flood, men being replaced by fresh men as their strength was exhausted. The women and children still brought their bundles, but more slowly now, as they had to go farther and farther afield from the bund to find ' ghimir.' Then came three camels of the shaikh, bearing dates for the hungry labourers ; no halt was called, but they ate in hasty mouthfuls, while still striving against their untiring enemy. For the wind blew still hard from the north, and the strength of the river seemed rather to increase than to lessen.

" All night the work went on. At dawn came a long string of camels and cows, bearing bundles of barley, freshly cut during the night from the shaikh's own crops.

" ' Rather would I lose the whole of my barley crop,' said Najim, ' than see my word broken.'

" By noon the two ring bunds were finished. The weary men from the water, their faces grey with fatigue, the men worn out with digging earth and carrying, threw themselves down where they were, and slept. The women also, withdrawing a little way apart, slept the deep sleep of exhaustion."

Haji Mohammed sank back, the tension of his body relaxed, as if the fatigue of that day were with him still.

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There was silence a moment before he continued his tale.

" Only Shaikh Najim and Abdulla slept not.

" ' Behold,' said Najim, as he looked at the work which at one time had seemed beyond human compassing, ' behold the promise of thy shaikh.'

" They stood for a few moments in silence. Then suddenly, with no warning, part of the first ring bund crumbled and gave way, letting in a torrent of the angry pent-up water to beat against the second bund.

" Speechless with anxiety the two men watched. Would it stand the strain ? It held—it held—no, a thin trickle of water was forcing its way through, eating out a channel. It grew wider—so wide—wider.

" With a shout the shaikh rushed to the weak point, calling to the sleeping men for help. But they were deep in slumber, and his voice was hoarse with his continual shouted encouragement of the day before.

" The water began to pour through. In two minutes it would be beyond control. What then, of his sacred oath ?

" Najim turned to the motionless figures beside the bund. With his giant strength he seized two sleeping men, thrust them into the widening breach, and held them down. Abdulla had awakened some of his tribesmen, and, stupid with sleep, they obeyed the shaikh's command, and piled earth, and still more earth, on the living bodies.

" Thus was the breach closed, and the waters came not to the land of Khazainah, and the honour of Shaikh Najim was saved."

With a dramatic gesture, Haji Mohammed ended his tale.

" What happened to Najim when this became known ? " asked the Political Officer.

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"Hakim, it took place before the coming of the English," said the old man simply.

The Political Officer's decision on his own case given, and his farewells said, Haji Mohammed departed, making his way backwards to the door, where he slipped on the sandals he had left on entering.

The Political Officer turned to the telephone and rang up the Irrigation Department.

"That you, Stevens? What about this breach at Al Juzra?"

"Oh, we have decided to give it up," came the answer. "With a flood like this, repairing the bund would cost more than the value of the crops it protects."

"Is there any objection to old Shaikh Najim's having a try?"

"None whatever; but I bet he doesn't succeed. What material has he got?

"Human bodies."

"What?"

"I mean to say, he will find his own material," amended the Political Officer.

"Right-o, let him have a shot; but I don't think he will succeed."

. . . . . .

A week later Shaikh Najim entered the Political Office, but with a stately manner which contrasted oddly with his last appearance there. His tall figure was arrayed in in a rich blue silk 'zabun,' patterned with gold thread, and reaching to his ankles. Above it was a heavily embroidered scarlet coat, and over all he wore a fine cream-coloured aba, while heavy silver rings set with turquoise adorned his hands.

With much dignity he offered the prescribed greetings,

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then, with a smile of triumphant satisfaction, came to the point of his visit.

" Sahib," he said, " the breach is closed."

THE CAMEL THIEVES.

" I, and I alone, stole the camels, and sold them to strangers ; and I have spent the price I gained for them. If anyone denies this, he is a liar. As for that "—the speaker pointed to a much soiled paper on the office table, —" it is a trick on the part of this townsman."

The Political Officer glanced at the man he was trying. He saw a young Arab, considerably below the usual stature of a tribesman, but strongly built and muscular, with broad powerful hands and feet. His face, still smooth and beardless, wore an expression of mingled bewilderment and defiance, which gave him rather the appearance of an angry child.

His accuser was a man of very different type—a townsman every inch of him, narrow-chested, sallow and unhealthy-looking, not over-clean, and afflicted, like most of his class, with ophthalmia.

" Only through the help of your Excellency and Allah," he now said smoothly, " can I obtain my rights."

The case was a little unusual. Rashid bin Thigub, the petitioner, had lost two camels, and had learned on inquiry that a certain Hattab and his two sons, reputed thieves, had been seen in the neighbourhood at the time. Thereupon, according to custom, Rashid had set out on a journey among the tribes, in the hope of learning the whereabouts of these men. Eventually he had come up with one of the sons—Ziarah, the young man now on trial.

According to Rashid, it appeared that on Ziarah's

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denial of all knowledge of the theft, the townsman had claimed his right of insisting that the suspected man should accompany him to Kerbala, there to swear on the tomb of Abbas that he was innocent. To this Ziarah had assented, but on the way had thought better of it, and agreed to seal a statement in writing, to the effect that he, his father and brother, had stolen the camels. This confession, sealed by sixteen witnesses, and for safety's sake countersigned by the Assistant Political Officer of a neighbouring town, was now on the office table.

Yet here was Ziarah stoutly denying that his father or brother had anything to do with the theft, affirming passionately that the document was a trick, and that he alone was the thief. And as there seemed to be more in the matter than met the eye, the case was adjourned for four days for further inquiry.

Three days later, as the Political Officer left his bungalow for his morning ride, a figure squatting in the shadow of the doorway rose, and, after a moment's hesitation, came forward. It was an elderly man, clad only in a coarse brown 'bisht,' and on his head a black 'kafiah' held in place by the twisted 'agal,' relic of the days when the Bedouin of the desert tied around his head the rope with which he tethered his camel. The man was tall and strongly built; his broad brown feet, the toes wide apart, and the heels cracked and roughened by the hot soil, had never known shoe or sandal. Above the short grey beard and hooked nose were deep-set piercing eyes, shaded from the fierce glare of the desert sun by heavy, overhanging brows.

"I kiss thy hand, Sahib," he said.

"Who are you?"

"I am Hattab, father of Ziarah, whom thou hast imprisoned," said the man. "Hakim," he went on rapidly,

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" it was I who stole the camels, the two camels of Rashid. I will return them to him now, and over and above this I will give him two more full-grown camels, if thine honour will but release my son from the jail."

It was not often that the Political Officer had to deal with a case in which two men eagerly affirmed each his own guilt and the innocence of the other.

" But Ziarah has confessed to the theft," he said.

" Nay, nay, he is very small and full of ignorance," said Hattab. " I admit that he was with me when I stole the camels ; but are the children to be held responsible for the father's sins ? Ah, Sahib, I kiss thy feet," he went on, suiting the action to the words. " We are the people of the desert, we die if we stay within walls. Of thy mercy, spare my son this death."

The Political Officer told him to report at his office at mid-day on the morrow, and went off for his ride. On his return he was met by Rashid, odiously gleeful.

" Sahib, with my own eyes I have seen another of the thieves in the town ; he is the father of Ziarah. I pray thee to send one of the police with me that he may be arrested."

But " I will see you at my office at mid-day to-morrow " was all the encouragement he got.

. . . . . .

At the appointed time Hattab presented himself at the office. Rashid had been hovering outside for an hour past. A few moments later the prisoner was brought in by his police escort, and at the unexpected sight of his father Ziarah started, and hung his head shamefacedly.

But Hattab ran forward and eagerly embraced the young man, kissing him on both cheeks.

" See how young and small is my son," he said, turning to the Political Officer.

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" Thy son no longer," said Ziarah, " since my treachery has brought thee also here a prisoner."

" A prisoner—treachery ! " replied Hattab, puzzled. " Nay, I came hither of my own free will."

There was silence while Ziarah's slow brain tried to grasp this fact.

" I do not understand, my father," he said at last in a bewildered tone.

" Speak ; be not afraid," said Hattab encouragingly. " Tell all, for the Government is just and merciful."

But Ziarah was neither fluent nor coherent, and it was only after many questions put to him, as well as to his father and to the townsman Rashid, that the Political Officer at length got to the bottom of the affair.

Ziarah was driving five donkeys to the village of his kinsman Bandar, where he hoped to sell them, when he was met by Rashid, who taxed him with the theft of his two camels. On his denial the townsman claimed his right to take Ziarah to swear to his innocence on the tomb of Abbas. To refuse this oath is, of course, tantamount to a confession of guilt, and Ziarah was forced to agree, hoping, however, to escape from his accuser's clutches before the journey could be begun. But Rashid was too clever for him. He arranged that Bandar should stand security for his young cousin, and also that the five donkeys should be left in his charge until their return. Reluctantly Ziarah set out on the long journey to Karbala.

As they travelled, the wily townsman took care to play on the fears of his companion. Ziarah, desert-bred and ignorant of the world, had already a firm belief in the powers of Abbas, and Rashid's tales of the dreadful vengeance which the ' Father of the Hot Head ' had been known to exact convinced the young man that he would never have the courage to swear a false oath on the grave

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of the Avenger. He sought desperately for a means of saving his skin; and finally, a private grievance over which he had been brooding for some time past suggested a way out.

Ziarah, his father and his brother Mahmud had all had a hand in the affair of the camels. But now the young man was on bad terms with Mahmud, and full of resentful feelings towards Hattab; for the latter, disregarding all established tribal custom, had bought a wife for his younger son, while Ziarah as yet had none. Why had his father refused to buy a woman for him, the elder? Ziarah brooded darkly over his wrong, forgetting his undeveloped mind and his meagre stature, as compared with that of his tall, upstanding, younger brother.

At the end of two days' travelling together, Rashid knew all the family history of the simple young man, and did not neglect his opportunity. Ziarah had only to seal a paper to the effect that his father and brother had stolen the camels, and he could straightway turn back, reclaim his donkeys, and return to the desert a free man. By the end of the third day Ziarah had agreed, and the two retraced their steps.

Rashid now suggested that they should make for the little town of Nasaidah, where they would find a mullah to draw up the document. But Ziarah absolutely refused.

"By Allah and thy head, I will not go," he said. "Never yet have I entered any walled town, nor will I while I live."

Once more the guile of Rashid was more than a match for Ziarah. Had not the young man told him that he wished to take a wife? Rashid, then, in gratitude for his help in the recovery of the camels, and because of the friendship which had sprung up between them, would give him his own sister for wife; and he would, so great was the affection which he felt towards his fellow-traveller,

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require no price—well, next to none—only the five donkeys left as security with the headman Bandar.

Ziarah wavered. To be independent of his father, to flaunt a wife before his brother's eyes, this did indeed seem a tempting prospect.

Rashid followed up his advantage.

"She is fair and comely to look upon. Her hair is dark and glossy, her face like the moon at full, her hands delicately tinted with henna. Soft as those of a gazelle are her eyes, and her body is tall and slender like the palm-tree swaying in the wind from the desert, while her fragrance is like the fragrance of a melon-blossom."

"But surely," objected Ziarah, "the daughter of so much beauty is already wedded, or at least betrothed?"

"She is as yet young," lied Rashid glibly, "but she has had many suitors, and was indeed betrothed; but (may Allah show him mercy) he died." The only sister of Rashid was fat and wrinkled, ophthalmic like himself, and shrewish of tongue; but what of that, since Ziarah would never see her?

The young tribesman, unable to resist the prospect of possessing so much loveliness, agreed to enter the town. Blindly following his guide through the dirty airless streets, he was led into the narrow bazaar, where a mullah, sitting cross-legged beside a shoemaker's shop, was found to write at Rashid's dictation. Ziarah, having taken the plunge, did not care what they wrote. Soon he would be away from this stuffy little town, in the free air of the desert—but not alone. No, his lovely bride would be by his side; he would look deep into eyes softer than those of a gazelle; he would gaze at a face more beautiful than the moon at full . . .

His day-dream was rudely interrupted by the harsh voice of Rashid, bidding him affix his thumb-impression

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to the paper, over which the mullah had just finished shaking fine sand. Still blindly, Ziarah obeyed. He could not have read the paper if he would, and it did not occur to his simple mind to ask to have it read over to him. So the fact that he was sealing a confession to the effect that not only his father and brother, but he himself with them, had been the camel-thieves, was lost on him ; for Rashid believed that a bird in the hand was worth two in the bush.

Rashid called for witnesses, and easily obtained a number of seals to the document. Antipathy between townsman and tribesman is always smouldering, and Rashid had no difficulty in inducing a sufficient number of the passers-by, " urban, squat and packed with guile," to produce their seals when a tribesman seemed likely to get into trouble.

Ziarah was hurried out of the bazaar—down more of these sunny stifling streets,—then a long wait outside a house. He hardly saw the sauntering townspeople, nor the naked children playing in the dust near-by, for once more the day-dream held him. He had seen the swaying palm in the oasis of the desert ; but he had never known the fragrance of the melon-flower. Would the scent be as good, he wondered, as that of burning ' arta ' wood of the desert ?

Once more Ziarah had a rude awakening. Two policemen suddenly appeared from the building behind him. He was hustled into the town jail. Too late he realised that he had been trapped by the hated townsman.

In the solitude of his cell wiser reflections came to Ziarah. His dream shattered, he realised the treachery of which he had been guilty, and in his remorse generously resolved to take the whole blame for the theft on his own shoulders. He would say he had sold the camels and

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spent the money. Then no one would attempt to take the prize away from his father, and—there was much solace in this thought—the hateful Rashid would not be able to get his camels back. So ran Ziarah's simple reasoning; but the unexpected appearance of his father, also claiming the whole guilt of the theft, had upset his plans and thrown him once more into a state of bewilderment.

"Have you the two camels with you now?" asked the Political Officer of old Hattab.

"Aye, the selfsame two. One, a she-camel, has a star on her forehead, as clear as the stars on the darkest night; the other has a blaze near the same place, but not distinctly marked."

The Political Officer's pencil drummed on the table. The camel with a clearly defined star on her forehead seemed somehow familiar.

"And not only these," continued Hattab, "but two others of my own will I give to Rashid, that my son may be released."

"I accept—I accept," cried Rashid, overjoyed at the prospect of becoming the owner of not two but four camels. "Where are my——"

"Silence!" snapped the Political Officer He was still thinking of the mark like a star.

"Rashid," he asked, "how much did you pay for these camels?"

The question was sudden and unexpected, and the townsman was taken off his guard.

"Eighteen liras," he replied; and then, seeing his error, quickly corrected himself. "I mean forty liras—yes, forty, Sahib."

Again the Political Officer's pencil drummed on the table. He touched his bell and told the farrash, who

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entered in response to the summons, to send in the head clerk.

" Ahmed Shah," he said to his babu, " I want you to go through last year's petitions—somewhere about May —a case of two camels reported stolen. I forget the owner's name, but I think he was of the Matafah tribe."

There was a long silence, unbroken until the babu entered with the required paper.

The petitioner, one Hassan bin Nasir, living in a neighbouring Division, stated that two camels had been stolen from him : one, a she-camel with the clear mark of a star on her forehead ; the other with similar but fainter marking. The animals had been traced as far as this Division, and the petitioner craved the mercy and kindness of the Hakim to recover them for him.

" Listen," said the Political Officer to Hattab, " the camels which you stole from Rashid are the property of Hassan, the son of Nasir. Your son Ziarah will remain in prison until you produce them, and in addition you must pay to Government the price of a third camel, for stealing is forbidden. This is a light fine ; but under the circumstances, and because this is the first time you have been before me, I make it no heavier. Next time, however, the punishment will not be a fine, but imprisonment.

" As for you, Rashid, if I had time to spare on you I should investigate how it came about that you only gave eighteen liras for two camels worth at least forty."

Hattab, kissing the Political Officer's hand and promising to produce the camels within seven days, left the office. His son went out with his police escort, and only Rashid remained.

" Sahib," he cried, throwing out his hands, while large tears rolled down his cheeks, " what of my eighteen liras ? "

" Get out ! " said the Political Officer.

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V.

FANTASIA.

I.

"WHY this worried mien, your honour the Bey?" asked the junior, entering the grass-thatched hut that served as orderly-room in the up-river station. For answer the Commandant threw an official letter across the table. He continued opening the others, newly arrived that morning, brought in by a naked Nuer whose post-bag was a stick, cleft to hold the correspondence, and tied at the top with a strip of hide to keep the mail together.

The younger officer read the communication, transcribed from a telegram received at the nearest office two hundred miles distant. It had been decoded from a simple cypher on arrival; also, before despatch, by the Egyptian telegraph clerk, whose dull life was brightened by this unlawful mental gymnastic.

To O.C. STATION,
MOYA KETIR.

H.E. the Sirdar will inspect your station beginning of April.

SEKRETAIR.

The news was absorbed with all the equanimity of one who is not directly responsible. To his senior it

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was fraught with dire possibilities, for many obvious reasons.

His command, of four companies and headquarters of a Soudanese battalion, was in rags, after repeated excursions against local chiefs, who had been raiding their neighbours' cattle; whilst the equipment, torn by thorn scrub on the forced marches in circumvention of elephant poachers, was in a sad state of disrepair. The roofs of the company huts required rethatching. The work had been delayed by unusually early rains, which had already formed a sea of mud on the black cotton soil. Worst of all, the year's supply of food, brought by steamer from Khartoum for the British officers' private needs, was nearly exhausted; and the new consignment could not be expected until river transport became available.

The great little man who held sway over the Soudan in those far-off days was, very rightly, a stickler for smart appearance and ceremony among the black troops, and was fully aware that a well-kept station meant a healthy one in this uninviting part of the country.

The O.C. looked up from his work as the native Bimbashi came into the hut with the daily report. He was the staff officer to the small garrison (although illiterate), a grizzled old Nuba of umpteen years' service, white man at heart and staunch Mohamadan soldier. His salute was irreproachable, and he stood like a statue in his clean khaki.

"May your day be happy, your honour the Bimbashi."

"May yours be happy and blessed, Sartel Bey."

"There is news. Sardet El Sirdar will inspect us after fourteen days."

"By God's will, all will be in order."

It was the usual formula, and the black mask remained

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inscrutable, but they both knew that many things were anything but in order!

After arrangements had been made to do the best under the adverse circumstances, and orders given to reblock the tarbushes into seemly shape, to crease the best pair of breeches, and patch up the worn leather equipment, he withdrew, to inform his men of the penalties that would be incurred if the reputation of the regiment was tarnished by any lapse from military virtue on their part.

Mohamad, the cook, was then summoned to a conference.

It has always been the law of the wilds that a guest must be offered the best that can be provided, and in this case the need for doing things well was paramount.

To lend an effect to his appearance, the cook, who had been enjoying a nap, brought a knife and steel into the presence, as if surprised in the application of his craft.

On being approached as to his menu for such a royal occasion, he at once described the dainties that could be served, if a generous variety was forthcoming of what he well knew to be unprocurable failing a series of miracles. After the description of a feast that reminded his attentive listeners of London and leave, he crossed his culinary tools in front of his portly person and cast his eyes to the roof in search of further inspiration. Having depleted his fund of imagination for the moment, his employers brought him back to earth and insisted on a list of what could be obtained from their combined stores. The recital did not take long.

There were two dozen tins of sausages, that owed their immunity from consumption to the label, that portrayed a highly inflated prize pig, and therefore found no favour in the eyes of the Mohamadan chef. A few odd tins of salmon were, of course, among the remnants of the year's

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provisions. One becomes slightly tired of this lordly fish in his pristine freshness; one certainly becomes heartily sick of him in the tin, despite artistic chemical colouring, and the cunning disguises to which he lends himself. Many atrocities are committed in the name of preserved game, but few travellers in the wilderness are innocent of having fallen victims to the tempting oval canister, with the engaging picture upon the top of gaily attired sportsmen, playing simultaneous havoc among the pheasants and wild duck, in what would appear to be the restricted kitchen garden of a profiteer's country palace. Two of these atrocities were in the list, and, on subsequent examination, proved to be both explosive and offensive. The possibilities of artificial food were disappointing, and Mohamad was desired to express his views upon what could be done with natural resources.

Again he looked upwards, and assumed the likeness of a hen drinking.

"There shall be fish from the river, also there shall be water-buck from the hulla, yet again there may be liver from the cattle—on toast."

"Empty talk, O Mohamad," was the reply. "Would you prepare dinner for a Greeki trader, or for His Excellency? The fish in our waters are mud fish, the meat of the water-buck is coarse and of a strong flavour. The meal will be as I order. First, there will be soup of tomatoes, made with milk and seasoned with red pepper gin. Then must we have an egg curry, mixed as you alone know how (the artful compliment was received with a broad smile). To follow there will be roast guinea-fowl, hung for thirty hours, then boned, and stuffed with ground nut and cunning herbs; but see to it, O Osta, that they are plucked of their feathers, and not flayed, as is your lazy tartib. Sweet potatoes, small and few in number,

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must be fried ; also rigl shall be served, so that the guests may think it is spinach from England—perhaps. You shall have further orders in time ; our talk is finished, Mohamad." The cook retrieved his sandals, which had been discarded, according to polite custom, on his entry, and retired.

Turning to the junior, the Commandant continued his instructions—

" You, my lad, will be excused parade on the day before, and will sally forth with the little .22, doing the needful among the guinea-fowl. Percy, the perfect pie dog, must tree them for you ; we don't want to spoil the shoot. You might show the Osta how to make that famous fruit salad of yours ; there are still a few tins left, and we've got that liquor from old Capato to give it a kick. So much for dinner ; now we'll fix up the band programme ; they'll like our cheery old orchestra, if it isn't a ' close-up ' performance."

The band sergeant was sent for, and instructed to bring suitable music for selection by a committee of three.

On his arrival a serious discussion took place. The score of a musical comedy, which had been popular in London about two years earlier, had at last reached this outpost of Empire, and he was anxious to include the chief item. When asked the title of the piece, he stated, " The song is about a beautiful and attractive young shamuta, who is possessed of very much money." The British officers were amused but puzzled.

" How does the music go, O Shawish ? "

" Thus, your Honours, Tum-tum-pom-pom-pay ! " (He gave a capital imitation of the cornet.) The well-built figure swayed to the air, the tassel of his red tarbush keeping time to the rhythm. It seemed almost impossible

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that, a few years before, this smart-looking soldier had been a naked Dinka savage.

"I know what he's driving at, it's 'The Dollar Princess,'" said the Bey. "But it is not stated, Shawish Abdul Abderahman, that this young lady was a courtesan."

The expert advanced another composition for approval: "It concerns two youths of evil habits, who came into the city from the hulla and created much disturbance. The written music was blown away in the last haboob, Sartel Bey." Again the vocal explanation revealed the name—it was "The Bing Boys on Broadway." The Soudanese are apt pupils and can pick up a tune by ear with the greatest ease. There was an occasion when a distinguished French colonial passed through our territory, and, being entitled to a guard of honour with band complete, the problem arose as to the rendering of the 'Marseillaise' for his delectation. Fortunately there was a gramophone available, and among the records was the national anthem of France.

After listening in rapt attention to a repetition of the air, the bandsmen were able to play the different parts with complete satisfaction—to themselves, at any rate.

The programme settled, the band sergeant commenced without delay to practise his merry men, and for days the two white men were almost reduced to homicidal mania by the constant strains that arose from the lines as the musicians wrestled with the intricacies of light opera.

Before the eventful day arrived, another important interview took place. It was with the head Sheika of the battalion.

This good lady held the position of regimental sergeant-major among the women and children. Under her command were other dames, each in charge of a company.

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They were responsible to the Bey for discipline among their sisters, and for seeing that justice was performed on those whose frailty caused their feet to stray from the path of virtue (as was frequently the case). For these lapses into guilty dalliance the punishment was inflicted with a cane, generally on the hand, but sometimes in the method employed on persons of tender years, the latter penalty being enforced in the privacy of the delinquent's abode.

It is the custom for the head Sheika to bring cups of black coffee to the orderly-room during the morning 'office' for the refreshment of the officers, and questions of interior economy in regard to the harrimat (married quarters) are then discussed.

The usual salutations passed as the old woman, in the spotless white robe of ceremony, came into the hut bearing a tray of small cups.

"What news from the harrimat, Sheika Fatma?"

"By the blessing of Allah, Zarah, the wife of Onbashi Abdelhi Idris, has borne a child," she replied.

"Mabrouk! She has two now, I think."

"Through the mercy of Allah, she has eight, your honour, and the last is a strong man child."

The talkative old lady was allowed her ten minutes of gossip, while the deft preparation of the coffee went on. Interspersed with valuable information of the inner life of the battalion were the details of small talk, beloved of the gentle sex the world over; but these informal Arabic conversations contributed to a good understanding between the reticent native soldiers and their leaders.

She was told of the approaching inspection, and the certainty of the Sirdar expressing a desire to visit the dusky wives and their numerous offspring. Entering into the arrangements with gusto, she promised to have all

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her command on view in their best robes, to have many drums in attendance, and that the Most High would be welcomed in proper style with a prolonged 'lu-luing' (a peculiar shrill cheer). With an eye to the main chance, she asked for, and was granted, a gift of money to purchase merrisa, the local millet beer that fosters the festive spirit of carnival.

As the day of inspection drew near heavy rains set in for the eight months' season, and the Sobat-Pibor turned into a vast stretch of dreary mud. The district is flat and swampy at any time of the year, but after weeks of storm the black cotton soil becomes saturated, and the scattered stations that guard the Abyssinian frontier are water-logged islands above the surrounding desolation. But there are brief intervals of sunshine during the depressing period, and every one prayed for fine weather to grace the forthcoming visit.

Soudanese soldiers are cleanly in their persons by nature, and the native company commanders applied the spur of *esprit de bataillon* to carry out the orders in regard to making the best of tattered uniforms and damaged equipment. In any case, the steady drill and hard-bitten appearance of the ranks spoke of a workman-like readiness for the warpath, apart from the niceties of fantasia or ceremony.

In the early morning of a grey day, the sentry, perched above the station in a high tree, where a covered platform had been constructed, called down from his eyrie the warning of a smudge of smoke on the horizon to the north.

A few hours later the white hull of a Government steamer could be made out with the aid of glasses as she followed the windings of the swollen stream, but it was evening before the thud of the stern-wheel could be heard

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and her outline seen plainly across the dead level of the land.

Meanwhile the Commandant and his brother officer, having donned the best uniform remaining from the attacks of white ants and damp, went down through the mud to the landing-place, where the discoloured water swirled past. As the small steamer drew near to the bank a dozen of the crew dived overboard from stem and stern, swimming ashore with loud yells to scare away any crocs that might be lurking round, and secured the vessel with ropes against the treachery of a sudden tornado. At the same time, a gangway of planks was thrown out. After their long weeks of wading in the black mire, the sight of the snowy decks and clean paint filled the onlookers with envious longing for the comforts of civilisation and an escape from the misery of the continual rains.

A cheerful voice hailed from the top steps of a railed stairway, where stood a tall figure in khaki.

" Hullo, Mr Commandant, so you're not washed off the map yet ! Come up, Master wants to see you both."

With friendly greeting they passed to the roofed upper deck, where a dapper little man with grey hair rose from a map-strewn table smiling in welcome. In those days there was no one living who knew more of the Soudan and its varied districts than Master (as he was named in affection). He was well aware of the trials of soldiering in the south, expressing his sympathy with a humorous first-hand knowledge for the hardships that he had known and experienced himself at the stormy beginning of our rule. With a rapid questioning he elicited the latest information of the year's progress in the savage land, and thanked them in a pleasant manner for the successful operations that had eliminated the truculent chief, and

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dispersed those thorns in the side of orderly government, the elephant poachers, who had raided for ivory and slaves from over the turbulent border.

At the end of the interview he looked keenly at the junior and said, " You've had a lot of fever, I hear. When are you due for leave ? "

" In two months' time, sir."

" That's good. A spell at home will soon set you up again, and don't forget to come and see me in town. I shall be on leave, too." As they left him he called to the Bey, " I'm looking forward to seeing many old friends in your battalion to-morrow."

The arrangements for the next day's inspection were made over a whisky-and-soda, and an invitation to dine in the Station Mess was accepted by the tall staff officer, who with an immaculate A.D.C. made up the personal entourage for the occasion. The latter, whose first experience it was of this part of the Soudan, had become slightly morbid on the subject of the weather, and must have been severely leg-pulled by the doctors in Khartoum, for he was under the impression that his short tour in the south would end in an attack of black-water at the least ; and as a precaution dosed himself with an abnormal amount of quinine, and enclosed his camp-bed at night within a mosquito-net of so close a mesh that it was almost air-tight, thereby courting a fuggy death from asphyxiation.

On leaving the steamer the two officers returned through the rain, amid the croaking of the frogs, to their quarters, offering prayers for a fine day on the morrow.

The gods who govern the White Nile and its swampy tributaries must have been in merciful mood, for on the entry of the marasla, who came into his master's hut with the early morning tea, report was made of a break

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in the clouds and a promise of sun. Later a dazzling ray shone through the open door and danced on the water in the tin bath. Outside, the world was transformed, for the river mists were rolling away as the massive clouds lifted. The dreary plains took on the appearance of English grassland in the brilliant light, and widespread patches of wild flowers, unnoticed in the sullen rain, turned to vivid colours under the clearing sky.

A noisy chatter arose from the troop lines as the garrison arrayed itself for inspection. The bandsmen, having cleaned their instruments to the semblance of an advertisement for brass polish, tried a preliminary canter up and down the scale until bidden to restrain their ardour by the distracted and illiterate Soudanese bimbashi, who was on the verge of hysteria over the compilation of a parade state (found to be lamentably inaccurate).

At the time appointed, the Bey came on to the ground for the purpose of taking over the command of the battalion, and halted in amazement as the companies sloped arms. Instead of the threadbare khaki, stained by constant wear and mended into comparative decency, with equipment held together by repeated repair, his men were turned out in completely new raiment. From red tarbush to blue putties they resembled the plates of a fashionable military tailor. They felt, and looked, devilish fine fellows, the long lines of black faces being wreathed in self-satisfied smiles.

The junior came up and saluted. " Battalion present, sir. We've arranged a surprise for you—the reis of the steamer is an old friend of yours—brought our stuff along from Khartoum North. The old nuggets do look top-hole, don't they ? "

It dawned upon the C.O. that the second in command had worked all night, in spite of the enervating ' goes ' of

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lever, the native company commanders entering gaily into the plot. During the hours of darkness the fatigue parties had laboured with a will to effect the transformation among the ranks.

"Thanks; it's a real stout effort, and we ought to go with a bang now." The acknowledgment was brief, but the incident remained in the memory of a gratified senior.

As the station gong sounded the hour, an imposing procession of four landed from the steamer. In addition to the British, there was a portly and jovial Egyptian staff officer, who boasted more than a drop of Turkish blood in his veins, sharing that nation's sense of humour to the full, and being very popular among his native confrères. On this occasion he nearly spoilt the dignity of the military spectacle. He was clad in review order that included spurs and riding-boots without nails (although ponies will not live in this district of the country).

Alas! his feet slipped on the downward slope of the greasy gangway, causing his ponderous bulk to collide with the lighter person of the immaculate A.D.C., whose leisured and haughty stride was charged into a staggering run, terminating with a forced landing in a sea of mud. Had the contretemps occurred in front of an English regiment, the irreverent Tommies, with pardonable excuse, would have burst into uncontrollable mirth, whereas the inherent politeness of the Soudanese gained the day—except for a subdued murmur of "Allah," the ranks remained unmoved.

On the approach of the Governor-General the battalion presented arms, with the disciplined precision of long practice, which also seems to ordain that one unfortunate should always drop his rifle, and forget in the ensuing panic the order, as expressed by the Guards drill instructor, to "Stand still, whatever 'appens." The luckless warrior

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bending to retrieve the disaster, caused his new tarbush, slightly on the small side, to fall into a puddle, scattering the owner's private belongings for all to see, from the handkerchief of blatant design to the oil-bottle and pull-through, which should have been confined to their proper place in the butt-trap of his rifle.

Ignoring the mishap, the Sirdar walked along the ranks of fighting-men crested by the glittering bayonets and the green regimental colour. In the rear the band was doing its best to compete with the growing clamour of welcome raised by the ladies of the harrimat in true local fashion. They had taken up a position in front of the circular huts of the garrison, these hive-shaped dwellings making an effective background to the gay hues of the moving mass of graceful tobes. Many of them were seated on low stools beating drums, or waving gaudy flags, and all were 'lu-luing' in shrill harmony. The fat jolly children enjoyed the fantasia in wild abandon, the boys running naked in the sunlight, the girls wearing the small bead apron of maidenhood.

In the constant movement and barbaric sounds there was an impressive contrast to the silent troops hard by, their lords and masters on parade.

After the battalion had marched past to the warlike strains of an ancient Nuba air, the native officers were called for, and old friendships revived. As each one came to shake hands with their leader of the past, the hard faces lit up, memories of half-forgotten fights and forays were called to mind, and the wonderful power of recognition never failed during the presentation.

It is the greatest gift that can be possessed by one whose life is passed in administration of the black races, and a timely remembrance of a slight acquaintance brings reward in unswerving loyalty.

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Of the women, he had a similar, almost uncanny, certainty of memory. In company with the Bey he passed to where the harrimat redoubled their cries of greeting. Sheika Fatma, as 'senior lady' of the regiment, saluted him by a kissing of hands and a speech of some length, the latter being slightly marred by a tendency to giggle under the convivial influence of merrisa (the beer of the country). Each of the sheikat, in their official sashes of distinctive colours, was brought forward, and there was a kindly word of friendliness for all. A visit was paid to the humble quarters, where, apart from the merrymaking, the widows of men killed on the last patrol were observing the Mohamadan rules of mourning in their white clothing.

On their return the acclamations grew in volume, and the Bey marvelled where all the women came from, until he noticed the same groups in each of the company lines. The wily Fatma, with an eye to stage effect, had adopted the method employed in management of theatrical armies. The Sirdar, having passed one block of huts, the cheering women and children, with 'drums and colours,' were bustled off from that section, round the back of the lines, and arrayed once more in a breathless state to await a second arrival.

After a too frequent repetition of this manœuvre some of the stouter dames developed a bolshy demeanour and refused to budge, deaf to the flow of invective from the sheika, who assailed roundly the rectitude of their parents and the virtue of their daughters, in her well-meant intention of putting a little ginger into their lagging steps.

It was all a great success, and before a return to the steamer became due, largesse was forthcoming in the shape of increased rations, both meat and dura, for consumption that evening, when a dance and feast would be held in honour of the occasion.

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II.

The luck o' the weather held, and it remained fine as the guests came ashore once more, guided to the mess hut by lanterns. A raised path enabled the party to avoid the black mud, where frogs were raising their evening chorus, and mosquitoes in myriads swarmed round the lights, seeking what they might devour. On reaching the door of wire mesh that excluded the million and one insects disporting themselves by night in the rainy season, no time was wasted in idle ceremony; but once within the defensive walls of close netting social canons were observed. A suffragi, in spotless white, came forward with a tray bearing short drinks and the usual bottle of quinine tablets; another waiter offered a selection of 'gadgets' —the appetising morsels of anchovy, stuffed olive or pâté, that herald the banquet in the wilds. When the buglers sounded the call to dine, the guests were ushered into an inner cage of mosquito netting, where the meal was served.

Mohamad, the cook, from the recesses of his lair among the varied implements of his calling, sent in an excellent repast.

By the smoky light of a wood fire his deft fingers removed the insect sharers of the soup, and flicked away the giant moths that chose a sticky end during the preparation of the fruit salad.

Nor did the band fail in a willing effort to further the entertainment. Disobeying instructions as to taking a 'close-up' position near the mess, they made the apparently necessary but unpleasant sounds of deep-breathing exercises that form a prelude to performance on wind instruments, and started with a metallic crash, causing a danger of snapping to the stems of the wine-glasses.

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Conversation was impossible without the aid of megaphones, but waiting for the impressive silence that came at the end of the first item, a deafened shawish was despatched with a stern order to the misguided leader of the band, who renewed his programme from a more seemly distance.

In the middle of an after-dinner rubber a low grumble of thunder, mingling with the throbbing of drums from where the men were holding high wassail in the shape of a Diluka, gave warning of an approaching storm. At the same moment a sigh of rising wind drew the attention of all to where, low down on the sombre horizon, there was a continuous flicker of lightning.

The bridge came to an abrupt end, the servants lighted the lanterns and brought the superfluous information of the imminent 'haboob.'

Owing to the short distance from the steamer, and a disinclination on the part of the hosts to terminate the rare meeting with men of their own race, who were able to give them the latest news from home, the whole party went down to the ship in company before saying farewell.

On leaving the mess hut the blackness of the night changed suddenly to brilliant light. In accordance with Soudanese custom, the soldiers had made torches that flamed into illumination as they lined the way to the river.

Exchanging salutations with the savage figures outlined against the shadows, the Sirdar passed along the avenue of flaring brightness, turning to wave good-bye at the gangway.

To the Bey he said the words that make hard service worth the while, and, shaking hands, embarked for the journey back to civilisation.

It was late that night when the harassed native Bimbashi

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sought his angerib. He had been complimented by his C.O. on his achievements during the harrowing period of inconvenient questioning by the Egyptian staff officer, and ill-timed requests for returns and states (that came to hand after frenzied search, but were found to be too approximate for acceptance).

As the stout old fighting-man, who was no 'scholard,' unwound the putties from his wiry legs, he listened intently with head on one side. Then mental relief caused his countenance to break into a broad grin, for, after sounds of a hesitating chug-chug from her stern-wheel, the small steamer, guided by a searchlight, glided down the river with the Inquisitor safely on board.

Although professing the tenets of a Moslem soldier, he practised the faith with a few minor reservations. Pouring out a generous helping of gin, he observed a discreet regard for the ears of his co-religionists in the next hut, remarking in a thankful voice as he raised the enamelled tin cup—

"Fantasia, khalas!"

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VI.

A BORDER AFFAIR.

THIS is an attempt at a record of events which have so far been buried in official files. The protagonists are mostly dead. Some six survive, in this pleasant land of regular meals and the policeman round the corner. So, lest susceptibilities be offended, a certain veil has been drawn across identities. Events, as well as people, have intentionally been either mixed up or made frankly composite. The dead, stout fellows, are the dead, and they won't mind; never was there less need of the tag *de mortuis*. The living will understand; and even though it make them restless, prone to throw down the printed page, stamp round the room, and drift out into the hall to finger the trophies, yet they also will forgive a tale, lop-sided, discursive, having breaks and patches, for the sake of the merry days lived through and not forgotten.

I.

The frontiers of India are varied. Each obstacle has its own problems, but one postulate is common to all—that it should stay where it is, and not be monkeyed with by intruders on the other side of the fence. The portion of the frontier which forms the mainly unexplored hinterland of Assam is a belt of great depth and difficulty, a tangle of dense jungle tossed about on a welter of moun-

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tains and ridges which are flung together under no apparent geographical or geological plan. The jungle is, due to a warm rainfall, surpassed in few places of the globe for volume and continuity throughout the year. An important river finds a weak spot in the mountain barrier and makes a crowded and freakish passage through the scrum from Central Asia to the ocean.

In this puzzling natural obstacle no immediate problem of invasion seemed possible at the time of which we write. As long as the belt had an Indiaward orientation, and the people beyond were either too lazy or too unmilitary to bother about it, all was well. But, following on a long period of Central Asian complication, the Power on the other side sent orders to its westernmost province to raise and equip an army for the effective occupation of a certain territory recently acquired by treaty. This occupation involved the movement of a force of some twenty thousand men for several months across the most inhospitable portion of Central Asia, where climate, transport and local resources had hitherto limited movements to the compass of an occasional caravan. The problem at first appeared insurmountable, and pretty well paralysed the provincial Viceroy, who knew all about a province, but not the first thing about a platoon.

Luckily, the occasion produced the man—a small provincial Taotai, one Chao Erh-Fêng. Within a year this extraordinary man had raised, equipped and thoroughly disciplined a good-sized army With this he launched out across the wastes, heedless of cold; of obstacles in mountain, river or desert; of almost negligible transport and supplies. With it he reached his destination, leaving a well-garrisoned line of communications behind him as he went. It was an epic achievement, of which we find traces in other great movements

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of Mongol armies of the past, each more astonishing than the one before. The details of Chao's exploit are on record in the Imperial archives of the Wai-Wu Pu, but they have never been given to the world. It may be possible to do so some day.

His expedition failed through no fault of his own. The main striking force was smashed and scattered; the tattered but still efficient remnants, largely from the line of communications, were presently rolled up to the starting-point, where, nobody wanting them, they became an incubus. They were well-armed, unpaid and with a clear notion of what they wanted, and Chao himself was the only man in the province who could deal with them. He, like all other unsuccessful generals, was beheaded; but before he died he found time to save from starvation the troops whom he had raised, and who appear to have regarded him as a demi-god. Under the guise of a frontier force, he split them up into small stockaded detachments of from one to three hundred rifles apiece, on the arc of a wide circle from the Burmese frontier to the Himalayas. Here they were told to live on the country and to make the best of it.

They commenced on the side of the jungle No Man's Land remote from India, and, gradually absorbing local resources, which were always scanty, worked inwards. The absorption was incidental to the state of affairs, and was in no way planned, nor had it any ulterior object. Each ragged brave had his rifle and a good supply of ammunition; the bare presence of both was sufficient to secure an adequate livelihood among a primitive jungle population with a respect for firearms.

A considerable time later this unsuspected state of affairs came to light. A certain English officer, let us call him X., journeyed overland from the Yangtze in

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search of takin, till then inadequately described or shot at. His passport described him as a bug-hunter, under a Mongol euphemism which raised the status to one of the learned professions. The country traversed was, and still is, some of the most dangerous to be found in the unmapped world. A cheerfully aggressive population lives on terms of equality or scarcely veiled superiority with the local officials, who in their turn are hysterically hostile to any foreign traveller who may tie himself up in an unmanageable situation. X., however, bluffed and wheedled himself to a point where bluff would work no longer, and then took frankly to night-travel and lying perdu by daylight, till he got to the takin country, where the difficulties of human opposition fizzled out in a state of nature hostile to any form of life except the takin.

His light-hearted attitude to dangerous travel is best seen in what happened next, in that he plunged headforemost into the tangled thicket which separated him from the nearest point in India.

Two marches in, he came on traces of Chao Erh-Fêng. A week later he found himself in the midst of a state of affairs which would have given even the youngest frontier officer food for anxious thought. He trod through it like Agag, and mostly by night, later leaving it behind him and making the better speed for it.

A long time later he reappeared, westward. He had finished a year's leave in this extraordinary way. His watch and his calendar had both of them long gone the way of the missing two-thirds of his kit, which may have accounted for his overstaying his leave by a considerable period. But the information he brought set the wires to headquarters buzzing. His journey was a feat, and yet it seems to have gone with a whimsical lilt from start to finish, as cheerily casual as the incomparable traveller·

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who brought it off. His arrival can only be touched on here. Starved and exhausted, lame and swollen with septic leech-bites, he managed the last fifty miles, where the river grew navigable, in a log dug-out, his clothes in tatters and his last pair of boots long fallen to bits. Yet when his crew of two junglis managed to make him understand that the headquarters of the Bor Shap was near, he extracted from his one despatch-box a much-creased glad rag, which had done duty at the Yamens and Taotai courts over the other side—a blue serge suit, a shirt and a collar. In these, and a pair of carpet slippers, he shuffled ashore and found his way to the Political's bungalow. Here, from 2 P.M. to 5, he waited patiently, not caring to send a message down to the Court-house. The Political arrived, and a light tea, which X., with quiet restraint, ate conventionally; so that it was not till an hour later that the big man realised that he had a case of starvation in front of him. Thereupon followed a mighty meal. But, to my mind, that initial restraint over the thin bread and butter and the bunlets commenced a bond between the two men that lasted for years after—a bond that had its bearing on much of the frontier work which followed.

By midnight the story was pieced together, rendered into telegraphese and cipher, and the Political, sitting over the Eurasian clerk in the tiny telegraph hut, dictated the groups and discouraged the sleepiness which would have relegated the job to to-morrow marnin, sah! The thing had its amusing aspect, not the least being the subsequent arrival from Olympus of a scarlet-crested letter, in tone as stiff as the cream-laid on which it was typed. It conveyed the severe official censure of the Ultimate Power in Council for the overstayal of leave; and went on to add, para. 2, the unsolicited fact that the sum of a large

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number of rupees had been awarded to the officer towards the expenses of the astonishing journey.

He took ten days' leave to Calcutta for a refit. There he got out from the remnants of his kit a bunch of note-book-leaves on which he had recorded a series of prismatic-compass bearings of the snow peaks visible from the valley as he travelled, and hitherto unknown. The bearings were accurate, but, in the nature of things, he had gone on from page to page as he marched, so that intersections, cross-bearings and back-bearings were never on the same sheet. He had forgotten to number the pages, and the binding of the notebook had long since dissolved into fragments. He was seen, some time later, seated at a large table with the distracted Surveyor-General; the table was strewn with notebook leaves, and they were trying to piece together an important contribution to the world's geographical knowledge by the light of pure hope.

The whole thing was an epic; it will be related some day in its proper place.

II.

Some time after X. had brought the state of affairs to light, headquarters told the local Government to see to it. The idea was the use of local resources to go and look into the matter. The corollary that the matter should be taken on, if found to be as stated, was implied rather than expressed. In the hands of the energetic frontier officers of the time, the taking on may well have been a foregone conclusion.

It was characteristic of the confidence reposed in the Political Officer by the local Government that from the first they gave him practically a free hand in money and personnel wherewith to carry out the task, thereafter asking him to get ahead with it.

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The job was big enough, in all conscience. Imprimis, there were these intruders to be found, seen to, and the *status quo ante* re-established. He knew enough about Chao to realise that his men would probably not take it lying down. Then there were the intervening tribes. Nobody knew anything about them, their numbers, their location, or their will to fight. If they were at all like their congeners near the border, anything from unpleasantness to a blaze-up of the whole frontier might be expected. But long experience of jungle tribes gave him hopes of a minutely subdivided collection of village democracies, mutually distrustful and without a common leader, using their gams as spokesmen, but depending for action on the results of dissecting by talk each problem as it occurred; they might flash out into a vindictive warfare wherein ambushes, poisoned arrows and whirlwind dao charges would figure largely, or they might remain in a condition of unstable equilibrium. They were not to be trusted. On the whole, he banked on the weaknesses of self-determination (though, indeed, that 'pestilent polysyllable' had not at that time come to birth), and if he were able to show them that he neither feared them nor wanted to worry them, then the problem of oozing through their country with an ever-decreasing force at the head of an ever-lengthening line of communications might yet be solved.

Least of all could any assistance be looked for from them. They lived from hand to mouth on a little rice cultivation and much foraging in the jungle, so every scrap of food for the force would have to be carried, and the force would have to carry it. How much food? How many carriers? There he couldn't even begin to guess. This much he knew of the country, unexplored though it was: it was a simply damnable tangle, wherein jungle,

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incessant climbing, rain, rivers and heat combined to make anything but static life nearly impossible. The expedition hadn't even the advantage of being on X.'s route, since considerations irrelevant to our subject sent it northwards instead of eastwards.

Now the first principle of jungle warfare is 'little and often.' Tactics, movements, camps, stockades, cannot be worked by horde, as in open warfare. A force with a frontage of one man will, if large, have an interminable length, and will invite trouble all along its vulnerable body. Much subdivision needs many leaders; and though he knew and trusted the Gurkha company commanders, yet many white men would be wanted in a land where every normal condition seemed to be standing on its head and waving its legs. So the first use he made of his *carte blanche* was to indent for officers. His requirements centred in the versatile. Physical fitness, confidence and enthusiasm were almost as necessary, since work—unremitting and exhausting to mind and body—would be the order of the day. His wide acquaintance of men gave him more to pick and choose from than he had room for, but twenty names were sent in and their owners were bidden to the feast. Hardly two came from the same cantonment, but they had one thing in common as they pushed north at their best speed: each travelled light, and each man's body-servant had a complete kit.

One limitation only was imposed on the Political—no more than one battalion of Military Police might be used. It was necessary to keep the thing as civil as possible, therefore the fewer soldiers the better.

But the battalion was worth many. Minutely subdivisible into responsible parts, the squad was the unit, and all larger formations multiples thereof. The N.C.O.'s were in daily habit of acting on their own with their

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squads. The company commanders (it was in the days before platoons) might be relied on in distant and prolonged responsibility. The white officers were final arbiters; but, being scanty, were more administrators than tactical leaders. All native ranks were Gurkha, born to the jungle and the queer ways thereof, and so closely akin to unadorned and uncomplicated Nature that they needed little training. The first lesson of all, the essential friendliness of the jungle itself, was a thing which one might preach in vain to the open plainsman or town-dweller; to the Gurkha it was such a matter of course that he would have gaped at any one bothering to assert it. This confidence, wedded to a merry combativeness and a complete trust in his fellows and in his superiors, made up the ideal jungle soldier.

All this needs stating once to show how a great deal of what subsequently happened would have been impossible with any but Gurkhas.

The details of how the supplies were obtained, and with them the semi-Tibetan coolie-transport to lift them, are irrelevant. Both had to come from a long way off; in the end, both infinitely exceeded the initial estimate. When the column eventually got back, it found the base camp four times as large as when it started.

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We next find a semi-cleared level space in the jungle, at the highest point on the river to which a stern-wheel steamer could penetrate—the bottom of the first rapids. Here foregathered, first, the battalion of Military Police with its four white officers. As their cooking fires twinkled on the first evening, the Political stepped ashore.

Charles Douglas Pardon-Howe, Political Officer of the Jungle Tracts, plenipotentiary in the Areas North of the River, friend of the worker and terror of the slacker,

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confirmed bachelor and occasional teetotaller, was born at Ballater, in the kingdom of Scotland, forty-two years previous to the time with which we deal. He stood six feet four in his rubber-soled shoes, had a chest as big as a bass drum, and the voice of the bull of Bashan. The immense dome of his bald head held a brain which no problem could stump and nothing could flurry; withal, he was a man of his hands, and great freckled hairy paws they were as they hung loosely to his sides. On occasion he could fly into a fury; and then the great air-passages, as round and big as the Marble Arch, would reverberate through the jungle like rolling drums. Only once can I remember seeing him struck dumb and stupid: a bit of petty meanness came to light in the dealings of a tribe with its neighbour, what time he held durbar between them; if recollection serves, he let the whole thing slide, and went off to the mess for a drink.

The gams, or headmen of tribes, would pad down to his bungalow at headquarters. Here, in the deep verandah, he would hold informal court, plaintiffs and defendants squatting on the bare boards. In five minutes he would get to the root of it all, and in nine cases out of ten an inter-tribal head-hunting would cease to impend. Once a gam said something impertinent. The Political Officer leant across the table and "Hr-r-r-r-ONGG!" said he, or noise to that effect; and, before the glassware in the dining-room had ceased vibrating, the gam had shot off the verandah, across the lawn and into the jungle. These eyes saw it.

Tireless of body, single and simple of purpose, withal kindly and courteous, a very parfyte gentyl knight was he. He stalked through the land with a lilt and a swing of which each and all of us, white man or Gurkha, caught the direct infection. Under a lesser man the mad adven-

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ture would have fizzled out, or, more probably, would never have started.

As he emerged from his hut next morning, his new officers commenced to arrive. Each, as he came ashore from steamer or dug-out, was met by a havildar and fatigue party, and a note showing his shanty and the direction of the mess hut; also the fact that a meal was available. Each, neglecting the meal and leaving kit and servant to the fatigue party, repaired forthwith to the Political, who, figuratively, took him by the hand and offered him beer. Most were welcomed by their short names. Each emerged from the hut with orders to go and get fed, and thereafter repair to the particular job assigned. Not one but was on working terms with his job by bed-time. Shorts and shirt-sleeves clothed each, the toilsome day sparsely punctuated with precarious meals, or meals indeed clean forgotten. This would end with a bath, the garb of the day flung down in a sticky heap in the corner of the shanty, dinner in clean clothes, and a general up-rising from camp-chairs as the Political beamed in the doorway and took the head of the table. Appetisers stood on a side-table; vermouth of two colours, and gin (the three were generally known as roast wolf, fried fox and boiled owl), but nobody bothered about them much. They were abstemious folk, and an unexpressed feeling existed that the frontier was a long way from short drinks.

Followed strenuous days. The heat was terrific; the rain, incessant for ten months of the year, was a warm downpour. If you stood in the doorway of your hut and put your hand out, it felt like a shower of blood. In five minutes it soaked you; but since it never chilled you, soaked you remained till bath-time. Any attempt at a mackintosh was futile; you got just as wet with perspiration inside it as you would with rain, and it hampered

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you. Luckily the base camp stood on an old sandbank. Had it been soil, the whole fit-out would presently have sunk into the mud and been no more seen.

The cheery efficiency of the camp was infectious. It was also a little strange, by standards of purely military expeditions. More work was got through, but in a looser way. It is hard to define the difference. Possibly something of the same sort differentiates an English industry run by private enterprise from the same industry nationalised or run by a Government department. The visible out-turn and economy of effort bore the same difference in both cases. But it was obvious that the work, loose though it was, would not have gone so well had it not been for the Political's power to choose his instruments.

In a little more than a fortnight from the landing of the first of the expedition, the first forerunners were off. It took half an hour for the little column to leave its ground and be swallowed up in the jungle path. The expedition had begun.

III.

In a few days another great camp of huts sprang up as an advanced base close below the hills and the first climb. With the first bound forward still in process of consolidation, the advance party pushed ahead. Let us go with them.

Now, as we have already seen, the essence of jungle tactics is 'little and often.' This limits a column, as a rule, to fifty rifles and a hundred-and-fifty carriers, which gives it a week's radius of action—or a bit longer if the daily rations are cut down. The difficulty throughout the operations was so to plan that the transport stayed back while the loads moved forward: a contradiction in terms, but one not altogether impossible. If fifty rifles and a

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hundred-and-fifty carriers could go forward to a spot where they could all live for a week, and if the hundred-and-fifty could go *back* again one march, then the fifty rifles could live for four weeks, though immobile. Why these gymnastics? The answer gives the key to all the long delays and many anxieties which filled the subsequent twelvemonth. The column, as a whole, could not push straight ahead with the food it carried, since a time would come when the very vastness of the carrying power would eat up its loads and defeat its own objects, leaving the column *planté là* and foodless. The solution lay in a succession of bounds forward, each bound halting and piling up an accumulation of rations for the next forward move. As the line grew longer, so the halts also, since the increasing length of the line ate most of the stuff before it could reach the head of the line.

The little column, very compact and well closed up, moved off silently before dawn, and, as the inky blackness of the narrow tunnel-like path turned to its daily grey twilight, found themselves climbing abruptly. And here they got a foretaste of what was afterwards to be the normal angle of the human body. Despite all necessity for instant readiness of action, rifles had to be slung where hands were as valuable as feet and as necessary. Up and up, the thin track twisting and turning; not, indeed, to avoid the angle, but as the line of least resistance over a surface tangled with twisted roots, encumbered with the boles of fallen trees, slippery with rain and the mush of decaying vegetation generations old. The thin insistent warm rain pattering and dripping off a dozen intervening obstacles before it hit you; the glutinous heat; the gloom and the all-pervading reek like a garbage pail; the stink of clothed man in a land where all, by rights, should go naked, unescapable in the tightly packed column—

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all these went to the making of an atmosphere in which men lived and slept, toiled and fought against every conceivable obstacle, natural and unnatural, for the ensuing twelve months. An amphibian existence, overlaid with a smell. Let us state it at once and get done with it. Let it be packed into the back-consciousness as a setting for all that happened, week by week and month by month. The land and its jungle never were flat, not for a dozen yards, in all the twelvemonth of strain. One foot in front of another was always a step up or a step down. A stockade was to become a perpetual slope, varied by little terraced paths; a camp in a river bottom was out of the question in a land where water rose or fell a dozen feet in an hour at the bidding of the last rainstorm; the very ridge joining two impossible slopes was so narrow that one might well bestride it saddle fashion (these legs have ridden it), and at the same time sit softly on the precarious mush not six inches broad. To the end the greatest ambition of at least the white men would have been to walk two abreast over firm and level ground with God's sunlight beating on them out of a clear sky.

The first march climbed and scrambled through what seemed interminable hours. There were bellows to mend in the coolie line in the first half-hour, and halts were frequent. Tactics, except the normal advanced and rearguards and flankers, were impossible. Up and up; halt and start again and halt once more. Keep compact. The coolies must learn that their own safety depends on no straggling. Nothing by which to measure distance or progress.

At long last the grey twilight thinned in front. Abruptly the advanced guard dived over a knife-edge and came to a halt. What's up? Message passed back, "The hill's finished." "What?" "The *khud* has finished. What orders?"

A sparse prospect through the tree-tops showed a dis-

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tant opposite side to an apparently bottomless valley. A halt was called and a hurried meal eaten. The aneroid showed a rise of 6000 feet since starting.

Off again. The column plunged down the hill with its tail well up. The progress never degenerated into a run. Throughout, it was a scramble, often face to khud, and a ladder-like descent down roots and hanging on to creepers. It became nearly as toilsome as the ascent by the time an insistent whispering had grown into a roar of waters, and the column emerged in a shapeless mob on to the edge of a torrent.

The first day's march was done.

Down with loads. Off with kits. Get those coolies collected and out of the way. They will have half an hour's rest, and then they'll have to go back. Groans. What, *back* again? Yes, you'll go without loads. The Burra Sahib's orders. He wants you back there to-night.

So this is the place? A discoloured torrent plunging over piled rocks. A clear-cut edge to the jungle marking high water. *And* a stink. We can't camp down here. Out with your kukris. Get that jungle cut back. Up and around a spur the line formed, and, at whistle signal, moved forward—hacking merrily. The sappy tangle fell in swathes, and lay where it fell; the line progressed yard by yard, letting in daylight and clearing the ground. Forward, upward and around, flick, clatter and crash, the curved kukris swing and the jungle falls apart all ways. Merrily now. A havildar strikes up a monotonous chant—

solo: "*Has*tebira,"
tutti: "*Huinn*ssa!"
s. "*Bhal* gar, bhaiyan,"
t. "*huinn*ssa!"
s. "*Jor* garo, *bir*aho,"
t. "*huinn*ssa!"

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and so on interminably, each *huinn*ssa marking a swashing wipe with the kukri. They're at it now. Leave 'em to it. Five men escort from the rear-guard; get these coolies together; back to camp as fast as you can leg it, but *keep closed up*. The naik salutes briskly and doubles off. Three years' service and an independent responsibility of a hundred-and-fifty souls at a moment's notice in a land like this? A merry heart goes all the way, a sad tires in a mile-a. He bosses them together, sends one rifleman ahead as advanced guard, keeps another with him and sets the rest to herd the tail. In two minutes they have vanished. Any anxieties about them? None whatever.

Slowly the spur clears. In an hour there is not only room to camp but sufficient space to give à clear view from the perimeter. Huts, framed on saplings of cut débris and hastily roofed with banana fronds, spring up everywhere. Neither at this or at any subsequent time was there even one tent. The expedition never owned one. Whether temporary or permanent, the shelter was a hut, and skilful were all in their making. Standing camps had pretentious structures; temporary perimeters flung them together anyhow, so long as they kept the persistent rain out of bedding laboriously kept dry in waterproof covers during the day.

A whoop and a shove and a heave all together, and the cleared mush became a waist-high abattis all round the perimeter. Long before dark, what had been a jungle-packed spur had become an orderly cleared rectangle, defensible and snug. Kits were packed into huts; rations were piled neatly under cover, and raised off the sodden ground on a cribwork of logs. Cooking fires glimmered at nightfall, and presently there was no stir but the sentries.

Later it became a permanent stockade. For the mo-

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ment, all were too utterly fagged to bother about anything but dinner and bed.

Quick and sure these camps were made day by day. In their making, and the stockades which replaced them, the Gurkha shone as the handy man, *par excellence*, of the jungle.

Next morning there were surroundings to be investigated. The path ran down to a series of massive logs thrown from boulder to boulder across the torrent, and climbed to the opposite jungle. But why this stink? The drowsy rotten-vegetable smell normal to the tangle seemed to have got mixed with decaying eggs. Down to the water, whence the reek arose. On investigating the rocks we found sulphur thickly encrusted on them. The water, too, smelt abominably. We'll have to shift. No; nowhere to shift to. We'll have to stick it.

The camp was afterwards called Harrogate; the name stuck, and appeared in the reports.

A little technical planning of the stockade site; a subdivision of tasks among squads, and the two British officers were ready for the business of the day. Five men were told off as escort, and the subadar took charge of the stockading. It was necessary to explore ahead and see what, if anything, lay beyond the next ridge. By evening they were back, tired out, and nothing found but just such another ridge, a bit higher and steeper if anything, and an equally abrupt descent to a torrent the counterpart of Harrogate, bar a different but unidentifiable smell. No villages; no junglis. So far so good. The ten-foot logs of the stockade had taken shape, and with it the beginnings of a permanent Line-of-Communication Post. Another convoy of rations had come through, and with it two more officers.

Macmillan, a small, sinewy, red-haired fox of a fellow

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with a quiet manner and a knack of taking complete charge of any situation, however unexpected or involved. His lack of inches, and apparent insignificance, covered nine stone of pure gold. Loyal, silent and thorough, a thing was as good as done once you had given him the order. He was subaltern to Crooke. Now Crooke was a puzzle to us all. Normally, he had the dreariest manner imaginable, with a slow rather high-pitched speech, delivered through a thin beak which arched outwards from his sandy eyebrows. He had a long thin body and great bony hands and feet. When nothing much was happening, he appeared to be the gloomiest of all pessimists; the slightest thing would set him off, and then out would roll long thin strings of the most appalling despondency, rising and falling like violin storm-music in the Fliegende Holländer. On first acquaintance, anybody would have put him down as the most impossible chap in a show which literally depended for its success on cheery confidence. But, to be just to him, Crooke never impinged on this; it was the small things which set him off, the little trivialities which slipped unnoticed off the backs of the others. After a bit, it was obvious that this was not the real man; to any one who was, even once, privileged to see him in a difficult situation, above all in a fight, he changed out of recognition. The worse the task, the cheerier he grew. Normally a voracious eater in spite of his leanness, he could carry on for days on next to nothing when occasion needed. And, in a fight, he went gay and berserk, and flung things about with a complete disregard for his own skin. He came straight through the war untouched, though he was the only survivor of his company which sailed heavenwards on a Boche mine in January '15, near Festubert. By common consent, originating no one knew whence, he was known as the Doomworm, and universally loved.

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These two, after counsel taken, reported progress to the Burra Sahib, and suggested a further advance. Sanction came with an extra fifty rifles and a week's rations; the party duly dumped into Camp No. 2. Before the week was out, a third exploration forwards found the path blocked by a succession of parallel rock outcrops twelve feet high peering through the jungle like plinths of an Inca Temple, and only passable by the jungli method. This consisted in felling a tree against the rock face and cutting shallow notches in it, wherein the horny toes of the great splayed feet found secure foothold. It wouldn't do for men in boots. So bamboo ladders had to be made, replaced later by more solid log-cut steps. This took time, and the daily convoys had already filled the first two stockades before Camp 3 was made and the back pressure was relieved. The fourth march went comparatively easily, a succession of trifling ups and downs of not more than a couple of thousand feet each.

It is easy, after a lapse of years, to think lightly of the toil. But recollection brings an evening when, after a particularly poisonous day, Beach, the R.E. Survey Officer, took the trouble to add up the aneroid readings of the ups and downs to date. Questioned, he gave what he was at. In the first ten marches only, it appeared that an officer, jungle thin, in marching order, exerted just on two thousand foot tons of energy in getting over the ground. Blank incredulity. "All right; add up those figures and see." "What of it?" "Well, this much of it; it's the same as if you hoisted, say, a two-ton iron weight to the top of the Eiffel Tower and held it there. Also, my lad, if you let that same two-ton weight fall freely it would, on arrival at the bottom, go slap through a modern battleship from conning-tower to keelson, and sink it with all hands and the cook. Call that nothing?"

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Nor was the climbing done in passable comfort of person. The inside of the hat was usually the only dry spot on the man; herein reposed, as often as not, a rubber pouchful of baccy, and another holding a box of matches. The sodden clothes, soaked by rain from out inwardly, and by sweat from in outwards, held together shabbily. When they smelt too badly, the servant would wash them (and what quantities of bar-soap were used from first to last), and then kipper them to some semblance of dryness over a smoky wood fire. The smell thereby was at least a change.

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The end of the fifth march found the first serious check. By evening the advanced party had reached the precipitous upper bank of a large river flowing in from distant snows, and a worthy cousin of Big 'Un the Great, whom it joined two miles farther on. No torrent this, to be bridged with logs. Dawn next morning brought the problem in full sight. Three hundred yards from bank to precipitous bank; and below a swirling mass of yeasty water all breakers and whirlpools. Over this hung, in one sweeping festoon, the local idea of a bridge. It was made of two thin built-up ropes of cane. From these depended at intervals loops of split bamboo. Insecurely fastened to each loop was a third cane, the footway; *et voilà tout.* The thing had about the solidity of a wireless aerial. Below it, a clear two hundred feet, foamed the river. And, as they watched it, a thin little breeze got up. The crazy joke sagged gently outward in the wind, and as gently sagged back again.

By Jove! look at that.

Well, you know, nobody minded scrambling up and down dripping khuds, breaking his neck on ladders and generally behaving like a monkey on a stick; but this

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sort of thing *was* the limit. What's to happen now? They couldn't cross *that* particularly idiotic jest. . . . Let's think.

Thought brought no solution to the problem of how a man with boots could climb down and up a slippery slope consisting of a single cane, even if you cut out the river below. Blondin had been dead some years.

In the end they sent back an unvarnished account of it to the Burra Sahib, and gave it as their opinion that a thing like that had no place on an ordered line of communications. They awaited a reply, at his convenience.

One supposed, of course, that it could be crossed, as it had obviously taken some trouble to build. Later on they grew accustomed to the sight of local junglis, one at a time, launching forth on the spider-way. Great splay feet which had never known a boot; toes all separated and each endowed with independent movement; big toe, thumb-like, in apposition to the rest and prehensile, *more majorum.*

The reply came two days later, with Pardon-Howe in person. With him came various coils of thin wire cable, and a full appreciation of a situation apparently incapable of solution. First, he sent the two interpreters across, who, being in a way born to it, went barefoot and easily with a quick tripping step, which swung them to the other side in no time. They made light of the length of thin line which they unrolled as they proceeded. Arrived on the other bank, they hauled on the line made fast to the wire cable. First one line and then the other, till the two cable ends reached them. These they wrapped round, and knotted to, two big trees at their end. Now, says the Burra Sahib, haul on our ends. Right: that's enough. Make fast. And it was so. And there before us hung two cables of satisfactory solidity, three feet apart and well

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inside the structure of the bridge. Now cut down some of those bamboos and split them. Cut them in three-feet lengths, and notch them near the ends. Now you'll see; and he laid on the first two or three and wired them down to the cables. Now you can carry on.

After the first half-dozen, one got to forget the dizzy drop and the infernal flexibility beneath as one knelt. By evening there was a perfectly good bridge with a footway three feet wide, dependent on no haphazard vegetable matter but on good honest English cable, and the hand-rails of the old bridge to steady by. We crossed and recrossed it with confidence.

Pardon-Howe stood and looked at it, his great hairy arms hanging loose.

Would it stay put?

It would stay put.

And that was that.

A dozen times afterwards the thing was repeated with other rivers, till it became a drill. No one bridge ever needed mending or altering, and all were left behind, as good as when first made, when the column returned a year later.

Asked why he used such thin cable, he explained that the law of diminishing returns begins to operate when strength becomes weight. You could not indefinitely increase the tensile strength of wire cable by thickening it. There comes a time when the weight of the thickened cable itself would defeat its own strength if sufficiently long.

. . . . . .

Camp was shifted to the farther bank, and a picket placed at both ends of the bridge.

And now things commenced to move up apace. A large stockade, to be headquarters to this portion of the

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line; an ambitious ration go-down on generous lines; large accommodation for the coolie corps; and all hands set to pushing back the jungle. In a few days the centre of gravity of the expedition lay in the new post, and all to the south of it had thinned out into permanent lines of communication strength.

Pardon-Howe scrambled down the bank, threw a line into the tumbled water, and in five minutes was fast in what appeared to be an out-size mahseer.

All ranks fit and happy. The jungle is a friendly place.

IV.

Here or hereabouts the nude and primitive obtrudes; the primitive all bowed and arrowed, suspicious and inclined to be warlike.

It was important that he should not be warlike. Not that any one was afraid of him, but the truly damnable country held problems enough of its own without wanting any uncertain human nature added to it.

At the outset a considerable asset to our side lay in the presence in camp of one Toyo, Gam of 'Srosheng, in the Lower Territories closely adjoining base headquarters. This fine old specimen was extensively married in his own village, and related thereby to several of the tribes of the Upper River. On a recent occasion he had left home. He may or may not have gone down to see the Burra Sahib. Anyhow, while he was away, an outstanding Don Juan among the local youths had seen fit to make matters complicated in the Gam's household.

Toyo, coming back unexpectedly, caught his enemy all abroad, and hewed windows in him. This being judged rather undemocratic by the local chin-wag merchants, he bethought him of the Burra Sahib who used to make

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much of him, in a quiet way, whenever he called, and decided to put in a few months with him on the expedition. Hence the presence in camp of Gam Toyo, unclothed in person but wearing on his head a rolled-up Balaclava cap acquired from a rifleman, as a sign of adherence to civilisation. He had a few words of Hindustani and a wealth of expressive gesture, and appointed himself *ex-officio* intermediary between expedition headquarters and the rest of jungledom. He was about the only jungli we met who had any gentlemanly instincts, and would sooner have died than cadge a drink or a cigarette, though he never refused either, day or night. It was as amusing as giving buns to a bear: very solemn and apparently insatiable. He and a great half-witted oaf who carried his roll of bedding (also acquired as a sign of civilisation) were the only two junglis ever allowed into camp or stockade; to the remainder it was always kept a *terra incognita.*

Shortly after the bridge-building, Toyo went off on his own, and, coming back in the evening, announced the presence of a large village up the khud ahead, and that he had 'warned' a committee of the leading citizens to appear at the stockade next morning. "The deuce you did," said Pardon-Howe; "and who gave you leave and liking to order these strangers about? And what do you want me to do with them?" Oh, well; it would be a good thing if the Bor Shap saw them, and they saw the strength of the show the Sirkar was putting up; and anyhow, it would be as well to hand them out some of those clasp-knives and things, and Toyo glanced reminiscently towards the box of 'political presents' in Pardon-Howe's hut. He had a nerve, had Toyo. Probably his quiet self-confidence was one of the reasons why we all liked him so much; that and his primitively aristocratic

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insistence on keeping company with sahibs only, even if rather monosyllabic and gesticular ; you never saw him in the men's lines.

Next morning down the path came the deputation at a jog-trot ; fifteen of them (they always seemed to work in mobs) and a tailed-on following of small boys and smaller dogs come to look on. Tall upstanding men with, as you might expect from the country, big thighs and massive calves ; their feet we have noted already. Each man was clothed in a helmet built of interlacing bands of thick cane, proof against dao-cuts ; each carried a heavy dao slung slantwise across the chest in an open wooden scabbard ; each had a haversack of grey monkey-skin filled with a frowsy collection of odds and ends of coarse tobacco, millet cakes, metal tobacco-pipe, flint, tinder and what not. Had it been war, each would have carried a five-foot bow and a quiver of poisoned arrows. This was the absolute sum-total of their garb. All were unspeakably dirty.

Toyo went out to meet them. They crowded round him, all talking at once ; mannerless. Presently, assembled in some sort of order and squatting in a shapeless group, they awaited the Bor Shap, whose advent nobody acknowledged by more than an oafish curiosity and a bit more expectoration than before. He took his seat on a camp-chair ; the nearest jungli reached out a filthy paw and fingered the slack of his breeches, a texture unknown to him. The group shuffled forward without rising ; a dog got his paw trodden on, yelped, bit, and was cuffed out of the circle.

Toyo spoke up. " This, see, is the Bor Shap ; a good man, but heavy of hand and the master of many guns. Even white men obey him."

Pause.

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Expectoration, in rear, and another contretemps with a dog.

" He's a good man, this Bor Shap, and has come a long way to greet you and give you sharp knives which close like a trap; and fire-makers; also gewgaws for your wives. But he is in rather a hurry, having business over there," pointing north, " with the Kitai. He tells me he has no wish to interfere with you. He will come to your village to-morrow and give you presents; meanwhile, you've seen him, and you can go."

Not a stir. Lumpish grunts.

Small boy in the forefront of the group, his arm round a piebald cur, speaks up. " What business is it of yours, gam ? " Chorus of assent. " How do we know you haven't come to make war ? " " See," says Toyo, " he sits unarmed among you all Even his gun-soldiers are some way off. He wears no dao, nor is he afraid of you. Does he *look* like an enemy ? " He looked singularly placid, as a matter of fact, though, as he told us afterwards, the reek of the gathering was enough to turn his breakfast. Simple arguments; for a simple, childish, potentially venomous gathering mentally little above the apes. " Show us the knives, gam." " To-morrow, he brings them."

And they drifted off in ones and twos, curious about the unusual stir on the river-bank, ignored by the Gurkhas who had piled arms inside the perimeter and were yo-heave-ho'ing at the job of tightening the cables. The whole concourse was meaningless to the junglis; nor, to the unversed in the ways of armies, did the unarmed haphazard gathering of riflemen, coolies and white men, all unaccountably busy, look at all like an invasion.

" Well, there you are, you see," said Pardon-Howe in the mess later. " They're children; they've absolutely

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no organisation. As far as I can see they haven't even a gam, and settle their affairs by unending talk. Why, if you'd seen that little imp doing spokesman for them! All the same, they'll panic if we give them half a chance. And I want to get on; no time for wars"—and he gave out orders about deportment, avoiding any contact, and if the village must be gone through by any parties, we were to go straight through and not to bother about anything we met.

Next morning he climbed to the village with Toyo and a couple of laden coolies. For an hour he sat among the reeking mass of humans who crowded round and fingered bits of him. He dealt out knives and flints, highly coloured enamelled cups and burning-glasses; and handed a bulging parcel of Brummagem stuff to what looked like the female oldest inhabitant, who promptly skipped to her hut, mobbed by a jackdaw concourse of soiled Aphrodites. At long last he yawned, and strolled away down the path. As he entered the jungle, so Toyo told us, a small urchin narrowly missed him with a clod of clay; he didn't even turn his head.

He arrived back very late for lunch and ravenous. Some of us sat with him in the mess while, in silence, he made an enormous meal. At the end, he put down a long tumbler of Pilsener at one go; and, "thank Allah, who made men hollow!" sighed he. He pushed away his plate, and told us all about it.

Lord, but we were glad to have him back.

It was a mad thing to do, but it had its effect. That village held five hundred fighting men, but never afterwards were we troubled with anything worse than a meddlesome curiosity and endless cadging. Also, before we were ready for the next stage, the word had gone ahead that there was nothing to bother about, and the

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various monkey parliaments never succeeded in talking themselves into any definite action.

He had taken the measure of their foot all right.

Democracy. . . .

V.

From this time onwards we count the beginning of the big strain. It was pull devil, pull baker, and put your backs into it, all. Step by step and march by march, the advanced party pushed ahead and the main body followed. The coolie corps strung out in their daily toil; the rations moved up; not a soul was allowed up to the head of the line unless absolutely wanted, since every ounce off the rations toilsomely accumulating meant more delay for all. There was, indeed, no absolute necessity for hurry, in that there was no time-limit in a show the very geographical limits of which only became known from day to day. Government had given Pardon-Howe a free hand, and in return he loyally made the thing as cheap and as quick for them as was possible. Nobody knew better than he how the expense was mounting up; for instance, in the end, it was calculated that a load of rice which cost four rupees at the base was worth fifty-five by the time it reached the top; and the ever-increasing army of carriers simply ate money.

But the country was the very devil. Ridge after ridge stood right up on end, and had to be taken at the steepest angle each time; the infernal simian path compelled it. A two-thousand foot rise to each ridge, and the corresponding scramble down on the far side, became normal. It was just a case of slogging through by the narrow, sliding, slippy acclivity, up hill and down dale, and trusting to the endurance of white man, Gurkha and pahari carrier. To the end, none of the three failed us. They

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wore thin, they wore out; the output of horse-power slowed and diminished; but they never broke down.

Village by village they made good. Each camp and ensuing stockade was kept well away from the villages, which, indeed, were always perched on the higher spots. Each village solemnly assembled in the long hut used by the young warriors, and talked out the advent of the advanced party; and as solemnly arose from conference in the grey of the morning with nothing settled and tacit permission to all and sundry to do as pleased each best; as, indeed, he always did.

Fifteen marches done. The next bound forward took us through a village called Tuting; to our lasting regret it was not composed of two separate halves, so that there might be an Upper and a Lower. Down the other side, and we met yet another river.

Very occasionally the clouds lifted, to show us the lower snowy slopes, away and away up to our left, with unimagined heights above; but nothing to relieve or break the tangle ahead.

One evening two appeared in coats. We looked at each other. It was growing cooler! I don't remember that any one voiced the suspicion, the hope. But in one mind at least the idea glimmered, almost too good to suggest. In level we weren't *much* above the base camp, and the month was August; but could we be getting nearer snow? And was the snow ahead of us?

On and on we went, the line lengthening, and, perforce, thinning. Now we were reduced to a mere hundred rifles at the head, the survey party and the coolies who put the loads in from the last stage. All else were strung out along the lines of communication. Stockades, escorts, fever, construction casualties, thin them how we would, still the line strung out and still the man-power dwindled,

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till individuals were doing the work of squads, and squads, as such, were only to be found in the larger posts. You'd have thought that anyone with a thick stick could have broken the line and starved the head of it; and nobody so much as raised a finger to it. But no one seemed anxious; least of all the Political, to whom, week by week, we took the figures. Could we go on with this steam-bath amphibian existence indefinitely? Stout hearts, tough bodies, the Gurkha never weakened; but could we only have got more of him!

A week later; and though the grey weeping cloud-blanket lay as close as ever, and as stiflingly hot by day, that evening saw everyone in coats. It's getting colder. Whisper it. Are we getting near snow? If so, it's snow ahead; we've had the main range on our left for a long while, and that hasn't altered. If only we could see through the fog . . .

. . . . . .

By evening we had found another village, and there was the usual questioning through Toyo. This time we tried to discover more of what lay ahead. Who were the people? Oh, just people; different customs to ours. What sort of customs? Just customs . . . people. . . . Any mountains? Oh, yes (the word for mountain and jungle-scramble was all one, so no information here). Any snow? A nasal snigger and a pointing uphill to the usual lumps of limestone and ice far above us. Maddening people; they weren't really secretive; they just had the brains of hens, and about as much intelligent interest in their surroundings.

Next day facts and figures were examined. We couldn't go on for ever, stringing out a line like this. Something would snap. The escort at the head of the line had thinned to four squads, less than fifty men, and no kits amounted

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to more than a change of underclothes and a blanket; all else was sacrificed to rations.

A flying column, then. We'd have to chance it; with thirty rifles and a lump of reserve rations. Chance the distance, chance opposition on the way, chance the ultimate bump the nature of which none of us could foresee, when we ran into that for which we were searching. The fittest of the men, the most nearly Tibetan of the carriers, the half-dozen sahibs, and the rest would be luck.

Next day came the first glimmerings of a change. As we topped a ridge in the evening, there below us lay a collection of huts of unusual outline; and, stuck alongside them, long, thin, mast-like poles with something fluttering all down the length.

"A-ha!" said the Burra Sahib; "Tibetans!"

We tumbled pell-mell down the khudside and into the village. No flimsy structures these, of split bamboo; planks, roughed out by hand from logs; solid corner posts and roofs of stone slabs; a praying-wheel in front of the first hut, and what looked marvellously like a lama coming out to meet us.

In a moment our carriers had downed loads, hands up sleeves, tongues out and heads bobbing. Next minute we were in the thick of it with a thin little crowd of mannerly villagers. What a change from the grimy aboriginals lower down. Here were duffle-clad flat-faced folk, bowing and beaming from open doorways, square sturdy men and sonsie maidens. Would we be pleased to come inside? We would, bless 'em!

They gave us brick tea out of a copper tea-urn by an open hearth: a clean, rough, weather-proof comfort which reminded us of the interior of a crofter's cottage at home. Polite noises . . .

Gently does it.

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Touching, now, this small matter of Cathayans . . .

Volubility. But in the end we got nothing certain : no definite distance, no numbers.

We slept, snugged down in the friendly bothy. We foresaw fleas ; there were none. Next morning we were off again, bowed out by the lama, who had donned a dingy suit of full pontificals for the occasion. By evening there was just such another village, with more hospitality, but, if possible, less information.

Two days afterwards at midday we topped a ridge with an unusually clear view, and " Kitai ! " said Toyo, pointing.

Where ? We pulled out our field-glasses.

There, far, far away on a bare slope, hung three sordid-looking huts. A tattered banner drooped from a staff. Two figures in blue hung over a fire. Nothing more.

By evening we were up to them, and, in the failing light, took charge. There was a sergeant, and there were eight men. They were silent and suspicious, ragged in the remnants of a blue uniform, but each had a well-kept Belgian mauser and a full bandolier.

We settled down in their clearing, but aloof and with no chances taken. Next morning Pardon-Howe interviewed them. They had monosyllabic fragments of Tibetan in common, and, where these failed, the linguist of the party stepped in. He had a full knowledge of Yunnanese, but these men were Lolos from Szechuan, and understood not a word. But, and we found it wonderful, the sergeant had a working knowledge of ideograms. In twisty strokes and characters the conversation proceeded : the linguist drew them in pencil, the sergeant sketched a reply. He was an intelligent man. In ten minutes we knew that his was the advanced party of a main camp high up there. Where ? Up there, pointing. And, as if

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the elements had been listening, as we looked the veil lifted. A great white wall of snow and rock, all glimmery in the rising sun, rose above us. Way and away above it rose one majestic peak, so clean, so sharp, it looked as though it would have hurt to sit down on it. Swelling from its base ran a sharp ridge, which swept across to join the main range. And all beyond was clean blue sky.

With eyes bounded by long months of dripping jungle and a visibility of a hopeful fifty yards, we gazed and gazed.

The Doomworm broke the silence; for the first time for months he laughed outright and cracked his finger-joints. It hardly needed this to tell us there was something absolutely damnable in front of us.

Well, it would not do to show the Kitai-folk we were puzzled. There was a sharp questioning from the Political. A hundred and fifty men and an officer the other side of the range. How many? A hundred and fifty. When did you last see them? Oh, a long while ago, before the big snowfalls made bad travelling on the pass. They gave us a store of rations and orders to stay here. They don't bother with us much.

Well, we're going to meet them, and you'll have to come with us.

What? No fear. This is our post, and here we stay. Look; and he pointed to the banner. He pointed, too, at a flat face of rocks above the huts. The linguist translated the great sprawly characters carved in relief by patient toil: "The Outer Limit of the High Celestial Empire."

And here it dawned on us that this, this queer little problem, was what we had come all this distance to flatten out.

We could have mopped them up; but there was no

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sense in having a fight if we could argue, and anyhow they looked decent sorts, especially the sergeant. So Pardon-Howe spent a long day in argument. His was the patience of all big men; unhurried and persistent as dropping water, nobody could resist the quiet force of the man in the end. By tea-time the sergeant was cheerfully incapable of further argument and ready to agree to anything.

Long before dawn the whole camp was up and stirring. The banner was removed; the incised rock had to stay, and is probably there still.

They showed us the way up the snow. The toil of that day up the pass few of us will forget, and none of us will care to describe. Constitutions sapped with incessant toil and steamy heat; thin cotton clothes barely protected by blankets with a hole cut in the middle for the head to go through and belted on, poncho fashion. Burden of mind and body. A hundred and fifty men—*and* an officer. It sounded a problem.

By two, we topped the ridge. Luckily the thin icy air was still as still could be; the least wind, and our sweat-sodden clothes would have frozen on us. Hardly had we the energy to take in the wonderful panorama ahead of us. The downward sweep of the snow slope, dwindling off into a vast yellow plain backed by ridge after ridge of an unknown mountain system, apparently boundless east and west, and entirely unknown to geography.

We had expected a descent similar to the ascent. We had climbed goodness knew how high since the morning; but here in front of us the drop on to the tableland was a bare thousand feet.

Down the slope we slid and scrambled. Try how we would, any ordered formation broke up. It was a jumbled mob which dribbled out, an hour later, on to an open

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meadow of short grass. Alpine flora dotted the turf; bluest gentian, saxifrage, and, in one place, a great patch of flannel-textured edelweiss.

We swung forward and downward. On and on.

And there, ahead of us, lay the camp!

There was the rectangular enclosure, down by the thin stream of snow water. Good, stout, loopholed walls, clean surroundings, and all according to Cocker. And a blue-clothed Kitai sentry standing at the entrance.

We stopped to make some sort of formation, the Gurkhas in front and fanned out, to make the best show possible on few numbers; the coolies in a heap, behind; but Pardon-Howe in front of all. Somebody urged him to keep back. Not he.

In this formation we swept down the open slopes; and, as we did so, the camp woke up. Kitais of all sorts, and all in rags of worn uniform, came out and stood in a group, unarmed, and watching. I don't think any of us quite expected this. It was in the nature of an anti-climax, after all that had gone before.

Our linguist stepped out and spoke up. Before he had said half a dozen words, two of the Kitais disappeared into the enclosure and in a minute came forth. Between them they led a slim upright little man, straight and soldierly, in peaked cap and a clean khaki uniform. They led him up to where we were standing and came to a stop.

The little man faced vaguely in our direction, drew himself up, and saluted. He dropped his hand A vague nothingness lay over his wrinkled clean-cut features.

Dead silence.

"Poor chap's blind," said Pardon-Howe in a whisper.

Blind he was.

Pardon-Howe put out a great red paw to take him by the hand; but the little man, sensing the loom of the

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great bulk in front of him, dropped to a crouching position. The long slim fingers came out and tapped round the great worn boots ; tap, tap, and pat, he felt his way up the stockings, fingering the loose breeches ; rose to a half-crouch and then upright, and gently, so gently, fingered his way up ; up and up, over the great bony face and broad cheekbones, to the great and shiny dome.

" Ah-h-h," he sighed gently ; " the Bor Shap." And his hands fell back to his sides and his head drooped a little.

Pardon-Howe, absolutely at a loss, stood there without moving.

" Poor fellow, poor fellow."

Well, you know. . . .

. . . . . .

They led him back. The silence broke and the groups fell all ways, chattering. Some of the Kitai knew Yunnanese, and we got it out of them. They talked freely enough. He'd had a go of snow-blindness—the usual thing ; but ophthalmia had followed, and he hadn't known light from darkness these weeks past. They'd known about our coming for some time. They'd heard all about Pardon-Howe, and one gathers it was in terms in which the Sagas told of Thorfinn Karlsefne or of Hrolf the Ganger. What wonder that their leader longed to see ; or, failing this, to touch ?

And they were on their beam ends—down to nothing in food. The few Tibetan villages were worn thin with their exactions for months past, and were themselves on the verge of starvation ; but the Lieutenant—the Tuchun, as his men called him, honorifically—wouldn't let them take the last of it and drive out the people. In light or in darkness, he seems to have maintained a perfect discipline. Chao Erh-Fêng was dead ; but his shadow lived.

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They couldn't push forward; how could the Tuchun face the tribes below? A handful of rifles under a blind chief? The junglis would have made short work of them. And they couldn't go back, to starve in the cold wastes.

They were clean, dignified soldiers, sahibs all. They didn't say it, but it was fairly obvious in the end that they were infernally glad we'd come.

VI.

Well, you know, dammit, we couldn't make war on a blind man.

Pardon-Howe asked to see the Tuchun, and was taken to his tent. The little man received him courteously, feeling for a cushion for him, and remained standing in dignified silence till asked to be seated. Gently, and in tentative phrases, Pardon-Howe put it to him. Why stay here and starve? Why not accept the hospitality of the English and come down to India? *He* would see to it that no harm came to them. The junglis? Oh, the junglis . . . *those* monkeys; why . . . He put out a hand to the Tuchun's knee; *I'll* see to you and your men all right if you'll come.

It was obvious, without saying, that all Pardon-Howe thought of was how to help a clean and decent soldier in a dire necessity. The expedition aspect of the thing, I'm positive, never occurred to him. Here was a wholesome little sahib in a bad fix, and his decent following with him. . . .

Would he come?

The little yellow hands fell outward in a resigned gesture. The shoulders shrugged.

Yes; he'd come.

"Right," said Pardon-Howe, "you'll not regret it."

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He emerged, and as usual had his orders pat. In half an hour three Gurkha volunteers were off at their best pace. They carried a chit to Brodie at the nearest post, explaining the situation and requesting a second flying column to be slung out, by hook or by crook, with every ration they could lay hands on, current or reserve. Any risks to be taken. Cut down all posts to the minimum possible. If the junglis try to look sticky, tell 'em I'll eat 'em. But push it along. Tell Macalister and Gordon, Fraser and Drummond. All posts to close forward, but leave the bridge pickets.

Quick's the word.

The Kitais were fed full on the best we could give them : rice, which they hadn't seen in all the weary time they'd been living on—and loathing—the Tibetan tsamba ; full rations, though we cut ourselves down by a quarter and afterwards by a half, and were glad to do it, as we'd have been glad to give our boots, for the Burra Sahib.

The Tuchun he took under his personal care, and kept with him day and night through the weeks of struggle which followed. The care he took of him ! To see that great bulk busy round the little man — almost fussing . . .

We got back somehow. The Kitai outnumbered us five to one, but never was there so much as a look askance or a sour word. They palled up with the Gurkhas ; there was little to divide the two Mongol types. They camped clean, and fed clean, and left all clean behind them when they started each morning. They marched well. Each carried his pitiably small kit as well as his rifle, and I don't think one of them ever flagged in all the strain and scramble down to the base. Good men, and fine soldiers ; they came out of the ordeal with full marks.

The Tuchun we put in a *kilta* carrying-chair, carried on

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the back of one man. Three of our stoutest coolies, by turn, made light of the small bulk.

Pardon-Howe accompanied him always.

. . . . . .

We met Brodie when we were down to our last day's ration. He had brought everything needed, and had added an extra doctor-babu in case of a general breakdown. There was no breakdown. A week later we were into the regular line, and all was well. As we rolled it up we made a present of the contents of each post to the nearest jungli village. You should have seen them scramble. But we couldn't carry it.

As we had bluffed our way up, so we sailed easily down. There were those who foresaw a closing-in of the junglis and a riot round our rear; therewith disaster. But nothing of the sort happened. It takes a good soldier to retire with a sting in his tail; it takes a genius to withdraw, and the sting muzzled in a cheery indifference.

It had taken a year to lay out a line of communications 240 miles long by 18 inches broad. It took just a month to leave behind no trace of our work but the wire-slung bridges.

. . . . . .

The Kitai? A month after we got to headquarters we got orders to send them down to the seaport. Whence, by easy ways and comfortable, they went round by sea to their homes again.

I'm glad I didn't see the leave-taking of the Tuchun and Pardon-Howe.

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VII.

TALES OF THE MA'ADAN.[1]

THE Hakim Syasi is no more; long live the Mutasarrif! During four difficult years of war, and two still more difficult years of unratified peace, the task of preserving the Pax Britannica among the tribes in Mesopotamia fell to the Political Officer. To provide the Arabs with a temporary government in place of the Turkish one which we had overthrown, until such time as the signing of the Peace Treaty settled the future fate of the country, was a plain moral obligation; but government by any other policy than the Turkish one of *divide et impera*, setting shaikh against shaikh and tribe against tribe, was no easy task in a country where fighting is every man's recreation, if not his means of livelihood. It is not greatly to be wondered at that, after a long spell of enforced peace and quietness, the Arab, spoiling for a fight, fell an easy prey to Bolshevist and Pan-Islamic propaganda. Fighting, once begun, spread like some rapid disease which breaks out first in one part of the body, then in another, and for a time the British Government seemed unable to find a cure. Now a stiff dose of medicine has been given, in the shape of a complete change in the form of administration, by the setting up of a native government; and the patient, though still choking and splutter-

[1] Subsequently published in 'Haji Rikkan, Marsh Arab,' St James's Library, Chatto & Windus.

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ing after his unlooked-for and not altogether pleasing draught, seems likely to make a good recovery—in sha Allah! A few of the Political Officers remain in the new capacity of Adviser to an Arab Mutasarrif, or District Governor; many go to rejoin their regiments or other services; but, though full of hope for the future of Mesopotamia, they leave their old duties with regret, not easily forgetting those six years filled full with hard work and often heavy responsibility, but full, too, of interest and adventure and rich experience.

Below are a few pages, expanded and annotated, from the diary of a rather junior, very ordinary Political Officer. They deal only with the Ma'adan, the dwellers in the great marshes of Southern Mesopotamia; but they give some idea of the kind of work that has been going on all over the country during the past few years, and some sort of picture of an as yet little-known section of the people.

The marshes stretch, roughly speaking, for over fifty miles east and west, and for nearly a hundred north, of the reputed site of the Garden of Eden. The more civilised elements of the Ma'adan live on the edge of the marsh, and being busy in the cultivation of rice, give little trouble to Government. The same, unfortunately, cannot be said of their wilder cousins who live in the heart of the marshes. Here one finds great open spaces of water like inland seas, subject to sudden storms, in which many a craft and many a life are lost; and huge tracts so thickly covered with reeds that only a true marsh Arab can find his way through the narrow, tortuous water-channels. No land is to be seen, except where here and there strange mounds stand out high, or seeming high, in that vast expanse of water and reeds. On these, the remains of ancient cities, the marsh Arab builds his rough hut of mats woven by himself from the reeds. Where

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once rich men feasted and merchants bartered their goods beneath the sway of mighty Babylon, the marsh Arab now lives his wild free life, secure from his enemies, secure even hitherto from his chief enemy, the Government. His possessions are few, but indispensable: each family owns a mashhuf, a boat somewhat resembling a large high-prowed canoe, but covered, as Noah covered the Ark, with bitumen; three or four water-buffalo, to provide the milk which, eaten curdled and known as 'roba,' is the marsh Arab's staple food; a three-pronged spear for catching fish; and, as blood-feuds are anything but rare, each man possesses a rifle. Physically, they are a splendid people, tall and muscular, apparently unaffected by heat or cold, and as much at home in the water as out of it. A 'bisht,' or cloak of coarse brown wool, and for headgear the customary chafiya and agal, is the usual dress of the men, though, except in the presence of strangers, they often think it unnecessary to wear any clothes at all. The women, on the contrary, wear copious draperies of soft cotton stuff, its original crude colours faded by the sun to soft greens and reds. The origin of these people is not known; but, whatever they were in the past, there is no doubt that, in the early days of the war, more daring rascals or cleverer thieves would have been hard to find, and by their robberies and frequent raids on rail and river transport they made themselves no small nuisance to our troops passing up and down the river.

I. BLUFF.

My morning's work was nearly at an end, and still Haji Rikkan had not put in an appearance with the information which I had been expecting since early morning. It was turned two o'clock, and much too hot to go

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on working in a stuffy office, when I dismissed the last of my petitioners, an old woman with a pathetic faith in the power of the Hakim to recover from a soldier on a passing boat the price of the eggs which she had too confidingly handed up to him as the ship grazed the bank in passing her village. As she did not even know the number of the boat, identification of the delinquent seemed likely to prove difficult, and I had to vindicate the honesty of the British Army by paying over the six krans in question there and then. When she had gone, I leaned out of my office window and looked up the river as far as I could see. I wondered if anything had happened to the old man. By trade Haji Rikkan was a seller of reeds and mats, which he purchased in the marshes, and the nature of his occupation made him an excellent authority on the marsh Arabs. These people, after a brief spell of inactivity, were once more raiding our lines of communication. Hardly a night went by without an attack, or more than one, on boats passing up or down the river; and the villains seemed to be getting bolder, for that morning I had received news of two more raids carried out, not under cover of the darkness, but in broad daylight.

My farrash entered with a telegram. It was from 'Comms,'[1] a priority, reporting yet another raid; it pointed out that this was the third within thirty-six hours, gave a list of the articles stolen and ended, "Please take steps keep your district in order." The last words put my back up. In this part of the river the tall reeds of the marsh come right down to the water's edge, and it was the easiest thing in the world for a party of Arabs to lie hidden in wait, swing themselves up on a passing boat as she made her slow way against the strong-running

[1] Headquarters, lines of communication.

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stream, seize what booty they could, and slip off again to their homes in the marsh almost before those on board had time to fire a shot. To prevent such raids was not such an easy matter as 'Comms' seemed to think. A brigade could easily be lost in the marshes, and be decimated without ever seeing a man; aeroplanes, even if the army could spare them, were practically useless; and the suggestion that every ship should have an escort had had to be discarded for lack of troops.

Still deliberating the matter, I walked back to my rough bungalow of mud bricks, and had finished tiffin when the arrival of Haji Rikkan was announced. As I had hoped, he brought me invaluable information; his lists of the tribes inhabiting the marshes, and their subdivisions into hamulas, baits and khrishbas, enabled me to correct and amplify my own sketchy ones. More than that, he said he had identified the men I particularly wanted; the Bait Khafi were the people guilty of the recent raids, and they had just moved their home to an ishan or mound only some ten or fifteen minutes from the river.

"How did you find this out?" I asked.

"Tel al bardi" (the telegraph of the reeds), said Haji Rikkan, using the common Arab phrase for rumour.

I was disappointed, for 'tel al bardi' was no good to me, unless I were content to follow in the footsteps of the Turks, and punish any section which happened to be within reach, on the chance of its being the guilty one. In pre-war days, any Arab of the marshes, man, woman or child, innocent of theft or guilty, was shot out of hand if seen within sight of the river-bank, which policy of 'frightfulness' naturally had the effect of driving the tribes still farther into the marshes, and so out of reach of any control. The Bait Khafi's move towards the river

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might simply be the result of a growing confidence in the British Government. Even if Haji Rikkan's news were correct, and the guilty bait had really been bold enough to settle within a few minutes of the river, I could not risk punishing it without some assurance that I was not attacking a comparatively harmless and law-abiding community.

Proof I had to have, and a plan for going in search of it myself began to take shape in my mind. I decided, since everything depended on prompt action, to carry it out that same night. I would go up by moonlight to Saghifah, the nearest point on the river to the ishan described by Haji Rikkan, make a dash into the marsh and search the village. If stolen goods were found, the guilt of the Bait Khafi would be established, and punishment could be inflicted when a suitable opportunity presented itself.

As I set off up-stream that evening in my mashhuf, with Haji Rikkan for guide, I became more and more hopeful of success. My visit would be entirely unsuspected, and I might be able to establish the guilt of the Bait Khafi almost before they had realised that I was in their village at all. Certainly there was an element of risk, for the marsh Arabs were, at this particular period, better armed than they had ever been before. After the battle of Qurnah, Haji Rikkan told me, they reaped a rich harvest of rifles from the fleeing Turks—even the womenfolk, armed only with thick sticks, seizing them by force from the demoralised soldiery. Still, if it came to getting away quickly, I could trust my four stalwart mashhufchis to hold their own against any pursuit.

These, having been poling steadily for over two hours, had now decided on a change. Halshad, Fadhal and Mashraf jumped out with a long rope, looped themselves

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together so quickly that the mashhuf lost no way at all, and began to run at a steady trot along the bank. Mujaid sat in the stern to steer, and being freed from any very arduous work, struck up a droning love-song. Over and over again came the refrain, which might be roughly translated as follows :—

" So many tears have I shed, nightly, for love of thee,
That a bellum might float on my tears down to the sea,
From Baghdad, the Lady of Cities, might float to the sea."

The last golden light had long since died out of the sky, and the great stars appeared one by one against their background of darkest sapphire ; then came the moon, shining silver-clear as she shines only in the East, and still the mashhuf glided on up the silent river. We came in sight of Saghifah, which, according to Haji Rikkan, was within some fifteen minutes' poling distance of the ishan which I had come to visit, and I decided to get some sleep in the mashhuf while the short hours of darkness went by. I would time my visit for about an hour after sunrise, when most of the men would have left the village, either to drive their buffaloes to the grazing, or to collect gossab with which to weave their mats.

We tied up a few hundred yards below the quiet village, and I settled down to sleep, while Haji Rikkan went off on his own account into the village. He seemed to have been gone only a few minutes when I heard his voice in my ear.

" Sahib," he said, " the birds are flown."

" Gone ? " I asked stupidly.

It was only too true. The Bait Khafi, with such mysterious swiftness does news travel in the East, had somehow heard that they were suspected, and had that

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very day made another move, this time farther into the security of the marshes.

I cursed my ill-luck. A few minutes before I had been so sure of success, and now, with 'Comms'' remark still rankling in my mind, I must go tamely back, having accomplished nothing. I would not go back, I vowed; I would visit the Bait Khafi as I had planned, even if they had moved twenty miles from the river. Probably it would be imprudent, to say the least of it, to attempt a search for stolen goods; but still the unexpected arrival of a British officer in the heart of the marshes might have a good effect, and I could at all events deliver a solemn warning in the name of the Hakuma.[1] With luck and a bit of bluff, I might still gain some measure of success.

This decision I announced to Haji Rikkan, who promptly refused to act as guide on any such hare-brained expedition; but in the end I reduced him to reason. The four mashhufchis were, as always, game for anything, and it was decided that we should set off a little before dawn. Till then, sleep for us all.

The sun was just rising as we passed Abu Dhalab, our former destination. It was deserted; the fugitives had left behind only the bare framework of their huts—bundles of tall reeds bent semicircular-wise, their ends in the ground; the rush-mats which the marshman fixes over a row of these to make his hut had been carried away with his other possessions. Progress seemed slow as we threaded our way through the high reeds, in and out of the narrow twisting waterways, the mashhufchis now poling, now paddling, now wading knee-deep to push the boat over a shallow patch. We had been going nearly three hours before we saw any signs of life. Then suddenly, rounding a bend, we came upon a group of people,

[1] Government.

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apparently camping out on rafts made of reeds. The men snatched up their rifles and splashed through the water to the cover of the nearest reeds; the women stared open-mouthed.

"Bait Khafi," whispered Haji Rikkan. He warned me to take no notice of them, but to push on to Umm al Khayis, an ishan where the headmen would probably be.

We passed more rafts, and I could not but reflect how difficult would be any military operations against people so absolutely mobile as these. All the men dashed for the shelter of the reeds in the same way, but I saw that this was not cowardice, as it seemed at first, but the best way of defending their women-folk.

Umm al Khayis was a very small ishan, a mere hillock, in fact. On it was a roughly erected hut. As our mashhuf rustled in among the reeds, Haji Rikkan shouted the names of the headmen, who emerged from the hut looking blank and bewildered at the sight of a solitary Britisher thus suddenly appearing in the very heart of their retreat. I landed and walked to the hut. They made no motion to stop me, but one of the men ran to the piled-up kit in a mashhuf beached near-by, and from beneath a calf, some chickens and a pile of cooking-pots, extricated a carpet, which he spread in the bare little hut. I seated myself in silence, and the four headmen did likewise. They seemed too bewildered even for the stereotyped greetings which rise mechanically to the lips of every Arab. Outside the hut the people crowded, staring, gesticulating, talking under their breath.

Three of my mashhufchis had entered with me and stood near the entrance to the hut; now Halshad joined them, grinning broadly. The temperature must have been about 100°, but he wore a khaki greatcoat tightly buttoned round his huge form. I saw him answer the question

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of the others, pointing to the laden mashhufs near the hut. Evidently I was not far off the right track.

"I have been sent," I announced, "by the Great British Government, to inform you that it is her wish to see all her people living in peace and quietness. Robbing and stealing are forbidden, and those who are guilty will be punished. Particularly," I added, "is it forbidden to rob from the Government. I now announce to you, O heads of the Bait Khafi, that your misdeeds are known to the Government, which will not fail to exact heavy punishment if you continue in your evil ways."

The leading spirit among the headmen seemed to be one Mahawi, a squat old man with vicious features and a dirty, straggling grey beard.

"Hakim," he replied, "some enemy of ours has brought you lying tales. We are peaceful marsh-dwellers, busy watching our buffalo and weaving our mats; how could we, poor weak folk, rob from the all-powerful Government?" The crowd signified approval.

"Two nights ago, from a steamer going down-stream, you stole——" I quoted from Comms' telegram. Outside there was a murmur of surprise: how could I possibly have heard so quickly?—for the miracle of the telegraph wires was not yet understood in the marshes. I caught a word here and there of the dismayed whispering. "Evidently he knows all . . . nothing is hidden from him . . . Lufta and Barbuti . . ." The last two words I felt certain I heard more than once.

Mahawi, scowling angrily, shouted to the people to be silent. Then he turned to me.

"If you say that the things were stolen, it must be so, for you, O Hakim, would not lie to us. But we have heard that a party of the Bait Bakal were seen near the river-bank two nights ago"

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"No," I replied, drawing a bow at a venture; "they belonged to the Bait Khafi, and their names were Lufta and Barbuti."

There was a sudden silence outside, and I followed up my advantage. "And these men must be produced before me before I leave this place."

The crowd broke into excited speech, the craven-hearted urging obedience, the bolder spirits protesting. Finally, the whole shouting mob surged away from the hut as the headmen went out to hold a consultation out of earshot. By this time the sun was well overhead, and blazed down with a fierceness against which the one thickness of rush-matting seemed no protection at all. The stuffy little hut grew hotter and hotter, and I began to wish the Bait Khafi at the bottom of the sea. At last old Mahawi reappeared, driving before him two small boys of perhaps eight years old. "Here are Lufta and Barbuti," he said.

No one likes to be made a fool of, and it really was very hot in the reed hut. Anyhow, at that point I lost my temper. Pushing Mahawi to the ground, I ordered Halshad to load, and shoot him if he tried to get up. Then I told the people to stop this tomfoolery and bring the real culprits. This summary treatment of their leader had an excellent effect; the crowd now felt sure that I had, if not the whole British Army, at any rate a few battalions, up my sleeve, and in a few moments two tall young men stood before me. I tried to cross-question them, but they seemed either sullen or stupid, and it occurred to me that the best way to settle the matter would be to give them a good thrashing there and then. I ordered the mashhufchis to tie them up to the framework of the hut. This produced great excitement among the crowd, and I saw ugly looks and threaten-

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ing gestures. Once more they went off to hold a consultation.

I remembered afterwards that in Turkish times a sentence of flogging practically amounted to a sentence of death; and the marsh-dwellers had no reason to suppose that my thrashing would not be of the same variety. Outside, the shouting grew louder and angrier. The spell of mingled surprise and fear which had so far held the people seemed to be wearing off. Fadhal entered and whispered to me that we were surrounded. As I looked out of each end of the hut, I could see the reeds waving, and here and there a glint of a rifle. I began to wonder how it would end. Old Mahawi was still squatting near me, with Halshad on guard over him; handing him a 'maheffa,' I told him to fan me. He would have liked to refuse, but Halshad moved a step nearer, and he set to work hastily. I felt more comfortable, for I was not keen on being potted at like a rabbit, and the tribesmen outside could not shoot now without the fear of hitting the wrong man. I wondered whether to risk the thrashing after all; it might have a good effect, but it might be just the one spark needed to kindle a most unpleasant blaze. I was still deliberating when one of the headmen rushed into the hut.

"You are surrounded," he said; "they are going to shoot. You had better go quickly."

I really had the wind up pretty badly, but the only thing to do was to bluff it out. "Ma yukhalif," [1] I said; "let them shoot." The old man stared at me for a moment, then turned and left the hut. A minute later the whole mob rushed in—not, as I expected, to make a speedy end of me, but sobbing, crying, kissing my hands and feet, tying their chafiahs round their necks, pressing

[1] No matter.

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their foreheads to the ground, making, in fact, the most complete and bewildering submission. I could only put it down to sheer panic: I was not the only one who had wind up! Somehow, in their untaught primitive minds, they must have reached the conclusion that, if the Government was so powerful that a single one of its servants remained unimpressed by the threats of a whole marsh tribe, it was best to be on friendly terms as soon as possible. Whatever their reasoning, I was now in a position to dictate terms. I would let Lufta and Barbuti off their thrashing, but the tribe must pay to Government ten times the value of the stolen goods, and pay it now. Taking the telegram from my pocket, I read out the list of thefts. "Army blanket, value five rupees; you will pay fifty rupees," and so on. The total came to about Rs. 600, and the four headmen set to work to collect the money.

What their system of accounts was I do not know, but everyone shouted at the top of his voice, and in the end no one seemed to be particularly dissatisfied, so I suppose the toll was levied more or less fairly. The headmen, like sidesmen in a village church, solemnly brought up each his collection. I counted out the handfuls of silver rupees and golden liras, and I had as much trouble to get the thirty or forty rupees still lacking as over the whole sum already collected.

At last I had it all tied up in a red chafiah, handed it to Mashraf to carry, and took a friendly farewell of the four headmen. I had just reached the mashhuf when an old white-haired Arab tottered up, seized my hand and kissed it.

"We have heard," he said, "that the Great British Government is all-powerful, and also all-merciful, but until to-day we have never believed it. Now we shall

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steal no more, for "—he dropped his voice to a confidential whisper, and pointed to a group of tribesmen who still somewhat sheepishly held their rifles—"they are afraid!"

II. FASLS.

What a relief to get away from that yelling, screaming mob! I have never quite understood what guides a tribe in its selection of headmen, but surely mere vocal strength must have a great deal to do with it.

So I thought as I lay back thankfully in the mashhuf, and left behind me the group of marsh huts in which I had spent a hot and toilsome day. The sound of harsh voices raised in disputation died away in the distance. We were nearing the end of the hot weather, and already the evenings had a fresh coolness which made the prospect of a couple of hours' mashhuf travelling a very pleasant one. Behind me, three of my mashhufchis poled steadily; in front, the figure of the fourth was silhouetted black and sharp against the glowing sky. Here and there among the reeds I saw tiny pink, white and yellow marsh flowers. The only sounds were the ripple of the water and the scrape of the poles against the boat.

I had been out that day into the marshes to make a 'fasl.' The tribes were very slowly becoming a little more law-abiding, robberies were gradually diminishing in number and frequency, and lately two baits of the Ramih tribe had shown signs of wanting to settle down and become respectable cultivators. This laudable desire was one to be encouraged, and luckily the marsh itself solved the problem of how to provide them with land on which to settle; for every year, as it recedes after the floods, it leaves behind for the cultivation of rice a little more land than the year before. So far all was well,

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but a difficulty arose: the Bait Mahail could not settle on land next to the Bait Attar, for they had been at blood-feud for over seven years, during which time one side had lost fifty-one men, and the other thirty-nine. A blood-feud among these wild people means a sort of war of extermination, during which it is not a crime but a duty to murder, either by raiding or in cold blood, as many as possible of the opposing tribe. Only one way of ending such a feud is recognised—the solemn making of a fasl of settlement, by the handing over of women. If the tribes are not related by blood, the price of each murdered man's life is two women; if it is the more serious matter of a feud between related tribes or families, five or even six women have to be paid 'per blood,' as they phrase it.

The life of a fasl-woman is a pitiable one. She is the absolute chattel of the man to whom she is allotted; however bad her treatment—and it is not likely to be over-good—she cannot demand a divorce. Still, she is one degree better off than a slave-woman, whom her owner may kill if he so desires: the man who kills his fasl-woman has to pay five women to her tribe, for, the Arabs argue, she is given in blood only, and is not his in blood and bone, as is the slave-woman.

To our Western minds the whole business seems barbarous, but it must be remembered that to these fierce tribes the system of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth is their only means of self-protection. Inter-marriage by means of a compulsory handing over of women has, over and over again, proved itself to be the best way of ending these long-standing blood-feuds, and of ensuring future peace and amity between the tribes concerned.

All the same, the handing over of sixty women at one time seemed to me intolerable, and this was why the fasl I had just fixed up had involved so much angry discussion

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and vituperation. The feud was an inter-related one, and a subtraction of the number of men lost by each side showed that the Bait Attar owed to the Bait Mahail the price of twelve lives—sixty women. It was not an easy business to persuade the headmen to a compromise; but in the end, after literally hours of argument and disputation, a settlement was reached. Twelve women were to be handed over at once, and the price of twenty-four; in five years' time, twelve more were to be paid over, and the price of another twelve—a woman's price being six hundred krans, about £10. This compact was sealed with solemn oaths, and a 'sanad' drawn up by an old mulla whom I had brought with me for the purpose.

We left the quiet marshes and came out into the river. A few more minutes' paddling down-stream brought us to the bungalow. Sounds of wailing, and the sight through the semi-darkness of a group of figures waiting on the bank, told me that my day's work was not yet ended. Near the door of the bungalow lay a still figure wrapped in an aba. I went and looked at it; it was the dead body of a woman —a murdered woman, the mourners told me. More than once before, a corpse had been brought in this way and laid near my door, a silent plea for justice, but never before had it been a woman's body. The people, satisfied that I had seen for myself, made no more ado, but carried the poor woman away for burial, and the next day I sent a letter to the shaikh to whose tribe the murderer belonged, ordering him to send the man in to my office.

"Sir, murderer herewith, please," was the somewhat Gilbertian note sent in by my clerk a few days later. I sent for the file to refresh my memory. It seemed a particularly brutal case, though no details were known as yet. A brother had murdered his own sister, apparently

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in cold blood, and there seemed to be another man in the case.

By tribal law, murder is not punishable by death, but a fasl is arranged between the murderer and the family of the victim. Similarly abduction, rape, theft and so on are all settled by fasl: for instance, if a man carries off a woman he has to pay her value, usually at an enhanced rate, to her father or brother; but if she happens to be married, he has not only to pay her value to her father, but to hand over to the bereaved husband one of his own daughters or sisters.

I sent for the murderer, a typical straight-featured, upstanding marsh Arab. "What have you got to say for yourself?" I asked.

He folded his arms. "Is it permitted for me to speak?"

This I recognised as the usual formula when a man wishes to say something which he thinks will prove unpalatable to his hearer. "You are protected," I replied.

"Hakim," he said, "you are our father, the lord of mercy and justice, and all our thoughts are known unto you. Why, then, am I brought before you as a common criminal? Have I not the right to expect praise and honour from you, as one who at great cost to himself has defended the honour of his tribe—since in that just cause I have not held my hand even from slaying my own sister, born of the same father and mother as myself?"

"Tell me your tale," I said. There was no doubting the man's earnestness.

"Hakim," he said, "I was returning from hunting the fish, and when I reached my house I found my little son of eight years weeping bitterly. He had been beaten, he said, by Gehait, son of Zaid. Straightway I went to the house of Gehait, and asked him, 'Did you strike my

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son ? ' Words passed between us, grew fierce and high. Then said Gehait, ' Is it so great a crime to beat a foolish boy ? Why these heated words about the sore back of your son, when you yourself allow your sister to break the honour of your tribe with Radhi ? ' So I left him with no more speech, and returning to my house found Faraihah sitting within. ' Sister,' I said, ' the price of adultery is death,' and I stabbed her twice."

" But," I said, " you killed her at a taunt from Gehait ? He might have been lying."

" No," said the man ; " he would not dare. If it were so, by our law he would be the cause of my sister's death, and would have to pay five women as fasl."

" What did you do then ? " I asked.

" Nothing. My mother came to wail over her, and the people carried away the body. Then came your message, and I am here. Hakim," he continued, " we know not the laws of the Turks nor of the English ; we know only our own law, and that of our fathers for many generations. Every man is bidden to preserve the honour of his tribe, and I have preserved the honour of mine."

It was perfectly true. According to tribal law I could not touch him, and he left my office a free man.

At home in England, bitter complaints are heard that there should be " one law for the man and another for the woman." But what of the lot of woman in this country ? She is paid over as compensation for the sins of men ; let her sin ever so little, and the penalty is death.

III. THE WEEPER.

Bahalool and Jahalool jumped out of their mashhuf and kissed my hand in greeting.

" Hwaya ! " exclaimed the latter, with an expressive

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wave of the arm towards the marshes. Bahalool said nothing, but the broad flash of his white teeth said, as plainly as his brother's exclamation, "The marsh is full of wild duck this morning. Good hunting!"

I got into the mashhuf, and sat in the bow, my gun ready. The brothers, wading knee-deep in the clear water, pushed off, leapt in as the boat cleared the shelving bank, and with strong swift strokes of their paddles sent her gliding down a narrow waterway which twisted and turned among the reeds. We passed the broad-leaved, rich green bardi, then the sturdy gossab which, as we penetrated deeper into the marshes, merged into the feathery-headed shabab. The brothers handled their paddles in absolute silence; silently the mashhuf made its way in and out of the winding channels. Bahalool and Jahalool were never at fault for direction, though to my inexperienced eye every turning looked exactly like the last. The blue water, the breeze, its March-morning freshness not yet lost, rustling in the tall reeds, the warm glow of the sun—friendly now, but destined in a few short weeks to become one's deadliest enemy—all combined to make a perfect day. Sport was excellent—so good that the sun was on its downward curve before I gave the order to return.

The sight of Bahalool leaning from the mashhuf to toss up the water into his mouth reminded me that I too was thirsty—hungry also, and I felt for my flask and sandwiches, but in vain. Somehow or other I had managed to leave them behind. Marsh water seems to have no ill-effects on the Arabs, but for a European it means almost certain fever. I decided to make for the nearest village, where at all events I could be sure of getting it well boiled in the shape of tea.

An argument ensued between the two mashhufchis.

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Apparently we could not reach the village selected by either without making a wide detour.

" Ma yukhalif," said Bahalool, suddenly struck with an idea—" the Weeper ! "

Jahalool agreed. The Weeper lived quite near.

I was on the point of questioning them, when I remembered that I had heard of an old woman who for years had lived alone in the heart of the marshes, spending every night in wailing and beating her breasts. What, I wondered, had driven her to seek this hermit's life ? What tragedy of fierce love and hate had been witnessed by the silent marsh, and buried in the deep security of its reeds and waters ?

A few minutes' swift paddling brought us to a small ishan marked by a single reed hut. As we neared it, a figure came down to the water's edge and stood waiting —the gaunt, erect figure of a middle-aged woman, with strongly marked features and bright, deep-set eyes. She bade us welcome, and led us to her hut, where she spread a carpet for me, bidding the mashhufchis fetch cushions from the far end. Apparently our visit did not seem to her strange or even unusual ; she asked no questions as to our destination, but quietly set about preparing tea. Taking a handful of dried gossab, she pushed the ends into the fire, which blazed up merrily round the old black kettle freshly filled with marsh water by Jahalool. From a wooden box she took three tiny, small-waisted glasses, washed and shook them dry, and placed them on a metal tray near the fire. She took from another box a solid lump of white sugar, broke it into smaller pieces, and put in each glass a lump large enough nearly to fill it. The kettle began to boil, and the woman shook some tea into an old broken-spouted teapot, poured the water on, and set it on the fire to brew. For a few more minutes

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we sat in silence ; then she poured tea into the three little glasses, and handed one each to me and to the mashhufchis, who sat together near the entrance.

So far, beyond the ordinary commonplaces of greeting, she had said nothing ; but now, as the two brothers talked in low voices over their tea, the word ' majnuna ' reached my ears, and hers also.

" Sahib," she said, " the world calls me mad. In your country, if a great sorrow fills all a woman's thoughts and all her life, is she counted mad ? "

I had no answer ready, and she appeared to expect none, but stared into the glowing embers of the fire. " He was a man ! " she said, hardly seeming to address anyone in particular. Then she turned to me with a sudden question. " You have heard of him ? "

" No," I replied, not knowing quite to whom she referred.

" You are but a boy," she said, as though excusing my ignorance. " Yet I remember, as though it had been only last year, my first sight of him. That was the year after the great hailstorm, and he sat talking in my father's hut. From behind the women's screen I looked at him : what strength, what mighty limbs ! Ah, he was good to look upon, bold of eye and full-bearded. We met—no matter how—not once but several times. He wanted to take me to wife, and I was ready, eager to go——"

Her voice died away, and I feared I should not hear my story after all. I waited in silence, and after a few moments she began to speak again.

" Gold, gold, who made gold ? Allah or the Evil One ? My father wanted fifty golden liras for me, and Ruwaidhi had none. Only a few months before he had sold his all, aye, and borrowed and pledged, to buy him a wife ; but that was before he saw me. I laughed at

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him for thinking of the price. Was I not ready to dare my father's wrath, and go with him whatever might befall us? 'Foolish tongue,' he said, 'I want you not for a day nor a year, but for all time. Shall your father come and seize you from me again? Mine is a poor tribe; can I see all my kinsfolk slain for a blood-feud of my beginning? Nay, fear not; I will devise a plan to make you mine without such folly.'

"I knew that he was wise as well as fearless, and I waited, waited patiently, though many weeks went by, for I trusted him. And not in vain, for a day came when he laid before me fifty liras, golden and shining in the sunlight. 'Whence?' I asked, and he told me. He had made a plan with Rissan bin Ghachi to steal and sell a few buffaloes from the Bait Wahaib; but they were unsuccessful, and barely escaped with their lives. As they made their way home in the mashhuf, bitterness filled the heart of Ruwaidhi, and he longed to kill the blundering fool Rissan who had spoiled his plan and lost him the fifty liras of which he thought day and night. No blood-feud would the slaying of Rissan bring about, for he was long an outcast from his tribe; and as the thought crossed Ruwaidhi's mind, a plan came to him, for he remembered the bitter enmity between Shaikh Hassan and Rissan son of Ghachi. Ruwaidhi was quick of brain and hand. He said to Rissan, 'It is a hot night and the dew has drenched our clothes; let us make a fire at the Ishan of Abu Dhahb and dry them.' It was agreed, and they kindled a fire with the dry pith of the reeds. Rissan sat by the fire. Ruwaidhi returned to the mashhuf, fetched his paddle, and stunned the man. Quickly he bound him, cast him into the boat, and bore him through the marshes till he reached the shaikh's house. He hid the mashhuf in the tall reeds, sought

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Hassan, and offered him the life of his enemy for fifty liras. 'No more than twenty is the dog's life worth,' said the shaikh; but Ruwaidhi was firm, and after much talk they struck a bargain. Hassan should kill the man with his own hands, and for his price forty-eight liras and a silver ring should be Ruwaidhi's. Together they went to the mashhuf, but not until Ruwaidhi had waited while the shaikh brought the gold from its hiding-place under the mud floor. Then, as he gazed down on his helpless enemy, he turned to Ruwaidhi, 'The money was well earned,' he said. 'Give me your dagger.' Thus was my price paid by the life of a man."

She paused again; then with a word of apology rose and refilled our glasses with sugar and tea. For a moment she stood at the door of the hut, looking out over the marsh. I waited in silence, for I felt she had more to tell; what would be the sequel of this wild tale? She sat down again beside the fire, a sad smile lighting up her thin face.

"A year we had," she said, "one short year, before Ali bin Shabib made dakhala. One year with him, and twenty-five alone. May Allah give him peace!"

She turned to me. "Do the peoples across the sea make dakhala?" she asked.

I shook my head, smiling as I thought how embarrassed would be a peaceable Londoner if a fugitive from justice should rush up and clasp his feet, compelling him, if he valued his honour, to protect him who made dakhala, even at the cost of his own life.

"He only did what his honour demanded," she went on as if to herself; "but, oh Allah! How we women suffer!"

She paused; then resumed in her former quiet tone of retrospect.

"For nearly a year we had been living on the edge of the Nasif marsh, but grazing for the buffaloes was getting

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short, and the tribe decided to move farther into the marshes. We were loath to go, we two, for we had been happy in that hut which was our first home together; and when the tribe moved we said to each other that we would be the last to go. Ah, would that we had been the first! On that last day, when all the rest had gone, we waited alone for the mashhuf which in a few hours would be back to fetch us and our household things. I was spinning wool, and looking out to the marsh water where Ruwaidhi in his challabiyah was spearing fish; if it had not been too small to hold another person, I should have been with him in the boat. He hurled his falih—a flash of silver, and he was poling towards me with the evening meal. Then from behind me came a rushing of feet; a flying hunted figure dashed across the mud, ran straight to Ruwaidhi as he leapt from the challabiyah, and seized him by the feet. 'Dakhilak, dakhilak!' he gasped. A bullet whistled over my head. My husband ran to the hut and seized his rifle. Ali's pursuers, some six or seven in number, broke shouting through the reeds; they cursed him for an adulterer who had broken the honour of their tribe, and called on Ruwaidhi to give him up. 'Never!' he said. 'He has made dakhala to me, and while I live I shall defend him.' Ali had no weapon, and asked for none; truly he was a craven youth, or perhaps spent with his flight, for he lay still where he had fallen. But the strength and valour of Ruwaidhi, and his deadly aim with a rifle, were known throughout the marshes, and his assailants feared to come too near. My heart throbbed with pride as I watched him—one against seven. One fell as his rifle rang out, but I heard my baby wailing in the hut, and ran to hide him in the reeds where he might be safe. Then I went back to my husband's side; he was wounded, and the men were growing bolder.

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The bullets came fast—see, I was wounded here and here. A great sleepiness came over me, and I crawled closer so that I might fall asleep near him. The noise of the fighting grew fainter.

"Suddenly I heard Ruwaidhi's voice speaking in my ear. 'Mahbuba,'[1] he said, 'Mahbuba, I have but six rounds left. Tell the stranger to take my challabiyah and take to the marshes; he will find protection with my tribe.' Painfully and slowly I struggled to the young man; I gave him the message. Then darkness came over me. When I awoke, I found my husband lying cold in a pool of blood; the stranger and the challabiyah had disappeared. I looked for my baby, but even he had not been spared."

She paused, and it seemed to me that a strange chill was in the air.

"Ah, Sahib," she said, "the world calls me mad. But those who love little grieve little."

. . . . . .

My visit had taken longer than I thought. The sun was setting in a cloud of flame as the mashhuf threaded its way out of the marshes. Everything was still; the tall feathery heads of the reeds had ceased their nodding; no whisperings in the rushes, no bird-voices from the reeds broke the silence. A puff of chill evening breeze rippled the water, and on it was borne, as if from very far away, the sound of a voice raised in lamentation.

IV. A BOUNDARY DISPUTE.

"Boundary disputes," I reflected gloomily as I reluctantly rose at 3 A.M. from my camp-bed on the roof, "are a confounded nuisance." After chota hazri and a bath,

[1] Beloved.

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however, I felt better, and decided that perhaps after all they were not such bad things. A Political Officer is necessarily tied to his desk for the greater part of his time, and any opportunity of getting 'out in the blue' is welcome, as affording at all events a chance of exercise. The middle of June is hardly the time one would choose for a day's riding under the blazing sun; but to go round by river in a mashhuf would have taken about twice as long, and, moreover, the matter in hand was one that had to be settled as speedily as might be. In Mesopotamia, a big tribal fight can only too quickly spring out of a dispute about a very small piece of land, and cases are not unknown where fifty men have been killed in a quarrel over a strip barely large enough to bury them in.

The particular dispute which I hoped to settle to-day seemed likely to be one of more than usual interest, chiefly because one of the disputants was that very unusual phenomenon, a shaikh-ess. In this country, where her price is rather more than that of a cow, and rather less than that of a horse, a woman needs considerable force of character and strength of will if she is to keep her inheritance and rule her wild tribesmen successfully. I felt interested to see what manner of woman was this Makia, who apparently felt herself strong enough to risk a quarrel with her more powerful neighbour, the Shaikh of Hashafah.

Dawn was breaking as we left the little town behind us and broke into the gentle steady canter which is the Arab pony's characteristic pace. Roads in this part of the world are unknown luxuries; we forged straight ahead, across country as flat as a billiard-table, stretching featureless on every side, level to the round horizon. The going is spoiled, however, by the irrigation cuts which occur every few hundred yards; Arab ponies will only jump in the last resort, and prefer to clamber in and

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out of the ditches, however steep and narrow. Very few of these cuts are actually in use, for every year they are left silted up by the receding flood, and the fellah has to set to work to dig them out again. When, after several diggings, the banks have become too high for him to throw the earth up easily, the lazy Arab simply leaves the old channel unused and digs another. Thus the land is intersected by a quite unnecessarily large number of irrigation cuts, to the annoyance of the rider and the profit of no one.

We were now leaving behind us the barley-growing land, with its stubble grazed to the ground by flocks. To the traveller up the Tigris, Mesopotamia appears a barren country, uncultivated and incapable of cultivation, but as a matter of fact this is only true of the land actually on the river-bank. The general slope of the land is not, as in most countries, down towards the river, but away from it. A short distance back from the river-bed lie the barley lands, and behind them, lower still, the rich rice country—so rich that I felt sure that Shaikh Jassim, with whom I had already had some dealings, would not give up his claim to a single acre without a struggle.

This dignitary, mounted on a scraggy grey mare, and followed by half a dozen hoshea or retainers, now came up with us. Both parties dismounted while the shaikh and I exchanged the prescribed polite greetings, after which, his men falling in behind, we rode on side by side. Jassim was a fat, heavy individual, slow-witted and very ignorant, but consumed with a childish vanity and self-importance. On the last account he was easy to manage, and a little flattery went a long way to keep him a peaceable servant of the British Government. Still, he was capable of a sullen, spoilt-child sort of obsti-

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nacy when his dignity or his possessions were in question, and this dispute over a few habls of rice-land was, I knew, a matter very near his heart.

In dealing with an Arab, it usually pays to let him go on talking until he has said all he has to say. For the next hour or so Shaikh Jassim expatiated on his grievance, not sparing Makia's reputation nor that of her ancestors, while I punctuated politely and non-committally. The sun was becoming unpleasantly hot, and already at seven o'clock the shade temperature must have been well up in the nineties; but shade there was none, for the only trees to be seen were a far-off smudge ahead of us on the horizon, probably marking the dwelling or the tomb of a Saiyid, or descendant of the Prophet. Away on our left I saw a caravan of camels, or so it seemed; but camels are unknown among the marsh-dwelling, buffalo-keeping Arabs of this district. The illusion is no infrequent one in this flat open country, where objects on the horizon often appear not smaller, but larger than they really are.

"Behold the daughter of Satan," said Jassim.

My caravan proved to be his enemy and her followers, who halted until we came up with them. Certainly Makia did not hold the allegiance of her tribe by reason of her beauty, for she had only one eye, and must have been nearing forty, by which time an Arab woman has long ceased to consider her appearance. But she was neither shy nor stupid, and greeted me gravely with perfect ease. She rode astride, with the Arab woman's natural grace of movement, and in spite of her none-too-clean ample draperies, a certain dignity marked her out as one who could rule men.

The bright cool green of the early rice crops, now almost ready for the sickle, was a welcome relief to the eye. The country we had just crossed had been deserted except

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for an occasional shepherd leading his brown and white flock to the barley stubble. Now we came upon an Arab village ; but the double row of reed-huts facing each other across a narrow stream seemed deserted too by all but a few old women busied among the black cooking-pots, and a handful of small children who, dressed comfortably in a piece of string round the waist, were playing in the mud. Half-submerged in the stream drowsed four or five placid buffalo ; a few hungry-looking chickens scratched near the huts, inside one of which I could see a couple of buffalo calves tethered to the family bed. The only sounds were the shrill voices of the children and the hum of a 'magrasha' as a woman husked rice.

We left the village behind, and in another quarter of an hour had reached our destination. The disputed land was planted with shital rice—that is to say, with rice which is sown broadcast on higher land, and transplanted, each seedling by hand, into the rich liquid mud left behind by the receding marsh after the flood season. The scene was one of unexpected beauty. The sun had not yet burnt up all the freshness of early morning ; behind us the rice-fields stretched their delicate jade-green almost to the horizon ; in front, the little tufts of the young crop showed paler green against the wet brown mud ; beyond lay the clear blue marsh water, meeting the deeper blue of the cloudless sky—a silent empty expanse, broken only here and there by tall clumps of slender brown reeds. The quiet was intense, the utter stillness seemed to speak of perfect absolute peace. But beneath the aba of more than one of the fellahs who passed us, bearing their bundles of young seedlings on their heads, I saw the outline of a rifle, and realised afresh that the smiling quiet marsh-land breeds men who hate fiercely and kill quickly, and

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that little more than a word or a blow might change this peaceful scene into one of bloodshed and horror.

The piece of ground in dispute was pointed out to me, the boundary between Jassim's land and Makia's clearly defined by a row of young willow-trees some four feet high. But in this very row of willows lay the burning question of the day, for Jassim accused Makia of having pulled them up and planted them again some distance farther into his land! The Arabs of all three parties began to talk at once, all showing me, with pointings and wavings of the arm, where exactly the boundary lay. I was frankly puzzled, for, except for the line of willows, there was nothing at all to divide the two holdings—nothing but a stretch of liquid mud, with its young rice-shoots three or four inches high, spreading away to the right and to the left.

It struck me that a possible test would be to take a pull at the willow-trees. If they came up easily, and had obviously been planted recently, Makia's guilt would be plain; and to tell the truth, I more than half suspected hers of being the quick brain which would scheme to transplant the boundary as well as the rice, while her unsuspecting neighbour slept. The only way was to apply the test myself, for I could not trust the impartiality of any Arab in the crowd of lookers-on. So I pulled off my shoes and stockings, rolled up my shorts and plunged boldly into the mud. Such an undignified proceeding was too much for Jassim, who remained stolidly seated on his pony; but Makia's bare brown feet were not too dainty for the mud —though it came above her ankles, underneath the ground was firm, and for a hundred yards or so we splashed on side by side. I remembered afterwards—or did I imagine it?—a wicked twinkle in her one eye when she stopped and suggested that I should go on alone; but all unsus-

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pecting I agreed, and plunged forward, up to the waist in mud. There I stuck, but Arab good manners did not permit so much as a smile at my ridiculous plight, until it was clear that the victim himself looked upon the matter as a joke, and I was speedily hauled out amid general laughter. Makia, the wretch, must have known just how far it was safe for the uninitiated to go. However, my intention of reaching the willows still held good, and as I watched the Arabs I found that the blades of rice are so extraordinarily strong that, by stepping from tuft to tuft, it is possible to go almost dry-footed over the marsh-land.

But my plan was doomed to failure, for the willow-trees refused to arbitrate: some came up in my hand as if they had been planted yesterday; others might have been there since the occupation. I went back to the waiting group, to find Makia and Jassim and their respective followings shouting at the tops of their voices. Each, not to be outdone, had claimed more and more land, with the result that the original dispute over a few acres had grown, in the space of a few minutes, to one in which each claimed about half the other's holding. It seemed advisable to separate the two parties while I tried to find some sort of landmark from which it might be possible to fix a new and, this time, immovable boundary-line; but in vain. I went back to the village, for it is often possible to get the truth out of children; but none of them could tell me anything.

The problem seemed insoluble, and I was in despair, when I caught sight of the clump of trees which I had noticed earlier in the morning, and inspiration came to me.

"Who lives over there?" I asked one of the village grandmothers.

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" Saiyid Fanakh, Sahib," she answered.

Now, to show generosity towards all Saiyids is incumbent on a good Mohammadan, and vastly increases one's chance of heaven. Makia and Jassim were both perfectly satisfied when I gave my decision: the present line of willows should stand, and a new one be planted on the line claimed by Jassim; the land between should be Makia's gift, or Jassim's, according to the point of view, to the holy descendant of the Prophet. Everyone present agreed that this was a ' khosh fikr,' an excellent thought, and the whole party left the spot in perfect concord.

Concord, however, could not last long between two such old enemies as Makia and Jassim, who before many minutes had passed were wrangling as to whose should be the honour of entertaining the Hakim to the mid-day meal. But this little matter was soon settled by my remarking that I would gratefully avail myself of Jassim's hospitality now, and of Makia's later in the day, by going home by way of her village and supping there—which programme, though it involved two heavy meals and much conversation on a very hot day, had the advantage of leaving everyone satisfied.

Only once, during the time that I spent in her madhif,[1] did Makia refer to the business of the morning. As she puffed at a cigarette, while her hoshea demolished what was left of the feast, she spoke in a confidential undertone.

" You are the Hakim. Why did you not punish that villain who would cheat a poor woman of her rights ? "

She looked at me sideways out of her one eye, read my thoughts, gave a deep chuckle, and began to talk of something else.

[1] Guest-house.

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V. THE FLAG OF ABBAS.

How best could I play this pawn ? I wondered.

Gradually the marshmen were settling down to a peaceful life as cultivators of rice or idhara. Slowly the raids on Government transport or on each other became less frequent. But a few recalcitrant baits still lived the old wild life, every now and again leaving their remote ishans in the marshes on expeditions of theft and robbery—partly, I think, for the mere excitement of the thing, partly because they still doubted our power to punish the offenders, or feared perhaps that our invitation to settle nearer the river was a trap to bring them within reach of Government. On the latest of these occasions, one of the raiding party had been wounded and captured, and sent to me as the nearest Political Officer, to be dealt with as I saw fit. He was a small boy of perhaps twelve, though like most Arabs he had no notion how old he was, and suggested thirty as a suitable age when I questioned him. Evidently he had been allowed to accompany his elders, as a sort of initiation into the tribal art of raiding, and it seemed absurd for me to sentence such a mere child to imprisonment, especially as his wounded thigh would mean, in any case, a long spell of hospital—to a marsh Arab as bad as, if not worse than, prison. Still, I was unwilling to hand him back unconditionally to his tribe, and make no use of the chance which had delivered him into my hands.

Eventually I decided to sell the boy to his family for a price—the price to be a solemn oath, " by the Flag of Abbas," on the part of the headmen, that the tribe would steal no more from Government. Messengers went out into the marsh with the terms, and the headmen agreed ;

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but only after some hesitation, for I was asking them to take the most binding of all oaths.

Abbas, the loved friend of Ali, he whose ' voice of brass ' turned the armies of the Prophet from flight in the Pass of Honein, is known among the tribes as ' Abu Ras al Harr,' the father of the hot head, and he is famed for the swiftness of his vengeance, living or dead. Thus an oath sworn by Abbas is one which the marsh Arab fears to break, lest some dire calamity should fall speedily on himself or on his family.

I was particularly busy just at this time, and did not want to spend a whole day over a mashhuf journey some eighteen or nineteen miles into the marshes. The headmen, on their side, would not come in to the river-bank, fearing a trap. We reached a compromise by arranging to meet at Zichah, some five miles into the marsh, and they promised that if I gave them ' hadha wa bukht,' my word of honour, that he should be in no danger, one of their headmen would come to the river to guide me to the rendezvous.

Accordingly, on a bitterly cold January morning, I went down by river as far as Kafairah, where I found waiting in the reeds a mashhuf manned by three strapping marshmen. As they came alongside, a huddled old figure in the middle straightened itself and rose to greet me; the Bait Naggar had kept their word and sent in a headman to act as guide. He seemed a colourless, rather stupid old fellow, and disinclined for conversation, for which I was not sorry; for as the two mashhufs went on side by side, all our remarks had to be shouted in the teeth of a tearing north-east wind. Mesopotamian hot weathers seem to leave one's blood rather thin, and I shivered in my British Warm before the cutting wind. The marshmen, clad only in their thin bishts, seemed to

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heed the cold as little as they had heeded the scorching sun of a few months back.

One of them, Hassan by name, was a particularly hardy, vigorous specimen of Arab humanity, with a frank expression and engaging smile which were all the more striking by contrast with the dour old headman.

In the narrow channels of the marshes, all the efforts of the mashhufchis had not been able to prevent our being continually blown into the reeds. Now we came out into a wide stretch of water, whipped by the wind into waves which smacked up against the side of the mashhuf, and every now and again sprayed us with a douche of icy water. The headman's boat came up alongside mine, and Hassan seized the opportunity to strike up a conversation.

"Hakim," he said, "these tribes deserve a severe punishment for bringing you out into the marshes on so inclement a day."

I agreed heartily to this proposition.

"Many a time have I told them," he went on, "of the greatness and power of the British Government, and foretold the punishment which would surely come, but they would not listen to my words."

I expressed sympathy with this Cassandra-like figure, and he was encouraged to continue in the same strain.

"These madmen, who persist in stealing and robbing, when they might settle down to a peaceful life under the protection of the great Hakuma, resemble their own buffaloes among which they live—they are without understanding."

At this point the marshmen's mashhuf went ahead, to guide us into a channel almost hidden in the reeds, and I held no more converse with the godly Hassan.

Another half-hour's poling brought us to Zichah, where

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the Bait Naggar were assembled in readiness. I exchanged greetings with the headmen, who led me to the largest hut on the ishan, in which presumably the ceremony of the oath was to take place. Coffee was brought, and one by one the other members of the bait drifted in, gave the usual salutations, and sat down.

When all were assembled, Khasib, the chief headman, addressed the meeting as he squatted beside me. He was a shifty-eyed fellow, but quick of brain and fluent of speech; in a rapid guttural flow of words he explained to the gathering the purpose of my coming: they were to swear by the Flag of Abbas that they would steal no more, and in return the boy Musa would be handed back to the tribe. This he repeated impressively several times, so that the dullest marshman should not fail to understand. Then he got up, cleared a space in the middle of the hut, and shouted for a 'gasba.' From the long reed that was hastily brought in, he broke off a piece a few feet long, and laying it on the ground said solemnly—

"This is the Sword of Abbas, of Abu Ras al Harr."

He then looked round the assembly, and seeing a tribesman wearing a loose garment of white stuff, "Obaid bin Machaifad," he said, "bring me your disdasha."

The man obeyed, and laid the garment down beside the reed.

"This," announced Khasib, "is the Flag of Allah, of Mohammad his Prophet and of Ali, and its avenger is Abbas. This flag is on me, on my eyes and on my life, on my brothers and on my kindred. Nothing is concealed or hidden, and its avenger is Abbas."

With these words he tied a corner of the disdasha round the reed. In turn the other three headmen came and tied a knot, each solemnly reciting the formula, "I tie this flag on me, on my brothers and on my uncles."

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The ceremony should now have been complete, for the headmen were swearing on behalf of the whole bait. But they did not feel at all comfortable. If the delights of thieving proved too much for the bolder spirits of the tribe, Abbas would avenge himself, not only on the guilty persons, but on the men who had taken the oath. Their position would be safer, they thought, if all the known thieves were made to tie the flag on their own behalf. Names were shouted accordingly, and one by one the villains of the piece came forward, glancing rather uncomfortably in my direction.

Outside I heard a stir, and raised voices. One of the thieves refused to come into the hut. A chorus of shouts and yells showed that the crowd was anxious he should change his mind, but he was adamant. As I could not distinguish a word amid all this hubbub, I asked an old Arab sitting next to me why the man would not swear.

"He has an only son," he said. "He fears the vengeance of Abbas."

I called in the unwilling one, and told him that he had nothing to fear from Abbas, if he did but refrain from stealing. This prospect appeared to find very little favour in his eyes, but at length he gave way. The shouting continued, for there still remained one or two notorious thieves without whose personal oath the tribe did not feel safe. Finally a little group came in to swear together; foremost amongst them was Hassan, my pious mashhufchi of the morning.

After giving the customary 'chiswa'[1] to the owner of the hut in which the Flag of Abbas had been tied, I left for my long cold journey back to the river, hoping that one more bait had been enticed out of its evil ways. But my hope was a vain one. Whether in a spirit of

[1] Present of clothing.

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bravado, or whether, more likely, they had persuaded themselves that an oath forced on them by a 'kafir' was not binding, I know not; but five days later the Bait Naggar raided and looted an up-going steamboat.

. . . . . .

There is a sequel to all this, and if I were writing fiction I should hesitate to tell it, for it savours somewhat of the motor-bus accident arranged by a worried author in his last chapter for the disposal of a few surplus characters. But as it is perfectly true, I relate it here.

About a fortnight after my visit to the marshes, the Bait Naggar, whose 'atwa'[1] with the Bait Yassin had just expired, decided to attack their ancient enemies and pay off a few old scores. But the Bait Yassin had been forewarned, and, taking a lesson from our troops, had dug in, with the result that the attacking party received the shock of their lives. They lost over a dozen killed, and among them, all four of the headmen who had tied the Flag. Abbas, Father of the Hot Head, had taken his revenge.

[1] Truce.

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VIII.

LIVING ON THE TOP OF THE WORLD.

How does it feel to be living on the top of the world—literally clinging to the slopes of the globe as it sweeps upwards towards the Pole, in the world's most isolated community, one of half a dozen human beings in a million square miles?

There are many claims to the doubtful honour of being an inhabitant of the most isolated settlement in the world—that spot on the surface of the globe most remote from the rest of humanity. But to one who has lived there, as I have, it seems that on all this earth there can be no more lonely spot than Craig Harbour, that barren cove on the southern shore of Ellesmere Land, the farthest-flung post of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

We were, with the exception of two small families of North Greenland Eskimos brought down from Etah, the only inhabitants of the vast 76,000 square miles of Ellesmere Land, that last stretch of land before the Pole. Northwards no human being existed. It was thrilling to stand outside the tiny shack on the barren shore of Jones Sound and gaze northwards—to feel that for those seven hundred miles to the Pole, and a thousand miles and more down the other side of the earth into the Siberian plains, no human being existed. Westwards stretched a million square miles in which no man dwelt, white man or native. We knew that it would be possible to leave the post and

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travel on the same degree of latitude completely round the earth before other humans would be encountered, and they a tiny tribe of two hundred Eskimos clinging precariously to the western coast of North Greenland. To the north-west lay a vast area which had never yet been scanned by the eye of white man, a huge expanse of frozen sea and barren land, stretching far out into the unknown. Southwards—to complete the orientation of Craig Harbour—lay three hundred and fifty miles of rugged ice and treacherous open water before one could reach Pond's Inlet on the northern tip of Baffin Land, itself almost as completely isolated as our own wretched habitation. There at Pond's Inlet was a small Eskimo village, a Hudson's Bay post and a Mounted Police detachment. To the south for 700 miles stretched Baffin Land. In all its 210,000 square miles there were only 1400 Eskimos, half a dozen trading-posts and two of our own.

When the lonely Arctic post was built a few years ago only half a dozen men formed its garrison. Then the following summer, when the supply ship *Arctic* called on her yearly round of the posts, three of the men went southwards to build another post in Baffin Land, a thousand miles nearer civilisation.

It is impossible, by the mere telling of a story, to bring home the realisation of the utter desolation, the bitter loneliness and terrible isolation of that post at Craig Harbour.

The *Arctic* left for the south soon after midnight on the 15th of August. The midnight sun shone weirdly through a heavy bank of mist lying over the pack-ice. Not a sound could be heard in the harbour but the incoming tide swishing about the base of the stranded icebergs and the creak of the *Arctic's* anchor-chain as she prepared to sail.

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We three, doomed to spend twelve long lonely months on Ellesmere before seeing another human face again, sat idly in the whaleboat alongside, exchanging parting sallies with the heavily-clothed figures leaning on the *Arctic's* rail. To us that old bluff-bowed whaler meant all civilisation. She was the only link between us and the outer world, and the warm glow shining up from her open hatchway seemed almost like the glow of our hearths at home Sharp commands rapped out in the gloom, and the engines began to throb. A few minutes later the black mountains surrounding the harbour rang with the boom of the *Arctic's* siren, thrice repeated, and with her bows swung southwards the vessel slid off for the open sea.

We sat in silence and watched her steam away, and then, each with thoughts he would not for the world have shared with the others, pulled for the shore. Half-way towards the post the *Arctic's* siren boomed again in the still night air a final farewell, her tall spars slid behind a big iceberg, and in a few minutes she had slipped into the mist of the Sound.

Once a year, usually in August, the *Arctic* struggled up from Quebec with her load of supplies for the Mounted Police posts in the Eastern Arctic, panting her way laboriously into each harbour as if the trip would be her last. She would stay a day, maybe two, perhaps only a few hours, bringing a breath of civilisation into the lonely little community.

At Craig Harbour she did not linger long. The season was short, and in latitude of 76.50 degrees north it meant a long year's imprisonment should she get caught in the grip of the terrible Arctic winter.

Southwards, at the luckier settlements, Pond's Inlet and Pangnirtung, on the shores of Cumberland Gulf, the ship stayed longer. There were other ships, too, down there in

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what seemed to us the southern waters of Baffin Bay ; the yearly Hudson's Bay steamer, other trading vessels, an exploration ship now and then, a whaler, to make life pleasant. But for us at Craig Harbour there was just the one.

Living there shut off from the outer world in the frozen fastness of Ellesmere Land, the sound of the *Arctic's* siren as she ploughed her way slowly through the ice each summer towards Craig Harbour seemed to us more heavenly than the sound of Gabriel's trumpet will ever be. It meant to us more than can ever be realised or imagined in civilisation.

Remember, if that ship failed to arrive there would be no other, only twelve long weary months more of isolation, such isolation as few men ever know.

Next to the intense desire for intercourse with our fellow-humans from the great ' outside,' it was the mail for which we longed the most.

Each summer, when the harbour clears after ten months of gazing at nothing but ice from the windows of the tiny post, two of the three white men go down the coast to a point where, on a clear day, they can see a hundred miles with the glasses from the cliff-top, far down the coast of North Devon Island to the southwards.

Then starts the vigil, the ceaseless nerve-racking strain of waiting.

Each morning these men climb, as I have done, to the top of the cliffs, a thousand feet above the sea, and strain their eyes southwards, hoping to catch a glimpse of smoke above the pack-ice lining the southern horizon or, luckier still, the black spars of the relief ship thrown in contrast against the shimmering white of a distant iceberg.

A summer will come, perhaps, when the inevitable will happen. The treacherous ice will hold her, maybe crush

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her, stout as she is, as she fights her way through the ice-choked channels of Baffin Bay. Perhaps the great pack itself will grip her and force her, with its billion tons of irresistible weight, aground on the rocky Greenland shore or the shoals off southern Baffin Land.

Maybe one summer she will not get that far. There are treacherous gales and currents in the Strait of Belle Isle, and then, far up on Ellesmere Land, in the very shadow of the Pole, two broken-hearted men will pack their tent with the first signs of winter and return to the post at Craig Harbour to wait, if it is humanly possible, for the passing of another year.

There are two months of open water off the Ellesmere coast at Craig Harbour. Some years, when the gods are specially good, a fierce gale from the mountains drives the ice from the coast in late June. Other years, when the season is late, the ice never leaves the sheltered fiords.

As a general rule there is little variety in the view from the Mounted Police post built on the shore of the rocky cove—nothing to be seen from the windows but the wind-swept ice of the bay, ice pouring down from the mountains in the big glaciers behind the post, ice driven in from the west and piled on the open beach, ice everywhere, ice and wind-worn naked rock.

There is no escape, no way of communicating with the outside world except by terrible sled journeys which would take two years to make. A sled journey of five hundred miles, an awful journey through a country devoid of human beings, across treacherous moving ice-pans, over steep glaciers to avoid stretches of black, icy, open water, and then what? A scattered village of Eskimos along the North Greenland coast, themselves seven hundred miles north of the nearest white post, and the most isolated natives in the world. And southwards? Just

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the same. A long sled journey, never yet made by white man, far to the westward to avoid the treacherous ice of Lancaster Sound, five hundred to six hundred miles of open wind-swept ice and barren island, and then only Pond's Inlet, with its trading-post, its Hudson Bay store, its handful of Eskimos and its equal isolation from the world of civilisation thousands of miles to the south.

Ellesmere Land. Barren, half-covered with ice thousands of feet thick, swept by the terrible gales which bear down upon it unhampered from the Pole, huge glaciers which run their broad ghastly mouths into the sea every few miles along the coast, bare rugged cliffs and naked stony valleys. That is Ellesmere Land, the home of three white men and a half-dozen Eskimos.

To be sure, here and there caribou moss grows sparsely. A few hardy Arctic flowers spring up in the sheltered spots along the coast in the fierce warmth of the few short weeks of summer; but the nearest tree, even the nearest bush, is a thousand miles away, down somewhere on the edge of the Barren Lands, north-west of Chesterfield Inlet, on the mainland of Canada.

In late October at Craig Harbour the sun sinks down below the southern horizon and does not return again until the following February.

It seemed to us, watching the blood-red orb drop below the ice-cap of North Devon, sixty miles to the southward, during that first year of occupation, that the sun had gone for ever.

Day after day the light in the sky grew paler. The red afterglow at noon gave way to saffron and then to a faint light above the southern heavens at midday. By December the last sunlight had departed, and absolute darkness reigned on Ellesmere.

During the lighter days of November and December

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the reflection in the heavens gave some respite. But on dark gloomy days, when the clouds were low or when mists from the black icy water of Baffin Bay swung inwards towards the land and obscured the southern sky, it seemed blacker than Hades on Ellesmere Land, and harder still to live.

Then the dreadful waiting, waiting, waiting each day for the sun to return, depressed by the curtailing of even normal activity, by the sombre stillness which lay over the frozen land, and by the pall of black darkness which seemed like an icy hand stretching down from the Pole.

For three long months and more the coal-oil lamps burned in the little shack, banked in six feet thick with snow to preserve the warmth within, and one of us at noon each day took a storm-lantern to read the thermometer hung on the wall outside to gather data for meteorologists down in civilisation.

It was warm within the little shack. Two big heaters burned with a supply of coal brought up from Quebec, and the six-foot wide wall of hard packed snow sheltered us from the fury of the northern blizzards.

For water we used ice, huge chunks of it chopped from the big icebergs stranded in the bay, hauled to the land with dog teams, and stacked beside the post. When it was needed it was placed in a big drum beside the stove to melt. In the summer time, for about three months we used the water from the glacial streams running down to the sea.

It was the moonlight, the bright, clear, scintillating moonlight, that made life possible in the winter at Craig Harbour.

Perhaps a month after the sun had gone on its long journey south the moon would rise with all her solemn majesty above the frozen mountains behind the post,

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shedding her brilliant light down on the black frozenness of Craig Harbour, and casting long black shadows from the cliffs and from the tall icebergs stranded in the bay. It was then that life moved in the little post. When the moon was full the trap-lines were visited daily, a dozen little tasks were done about the post, and with the thermometer at 50 degrees below zero we played football with the Eskimos on the hard stretch of snow behind the detachment buildings. Anything to kill the dread monotony. The days passed on leaden feet. It seemed to us, ringing the days on the calendar hung on the wall, that February would never come.

Christmas would come and go, always with a brave attempt at celebration, and with thoughts not uttered of Christmas in the homeland. It seemed then, most of all, that we were not on the earth at all, but marooned on a sunless frozen planet, barren and lifeless, from which there was no escape.

There was no fresh food other than the game shot in the fall and hung frozen for winter use—bear, musk-oxen, seal, walrus and ptarmigan. In place of fresh vegetables we daily drank a ration of lime juice to keep away the deadly scurvy, no longer now the menace of Arctic explorers and whalers.

For days at a time, when the terrific gales blew an avalanche of snow down on us from the mountains above, we lay imprisoned in the tiny post, reading until our eyes were worn out, too dispirited to talk with one another, and feeling that summer would never come.

Clad in heavy furs it was a pleasure during the awful winter months to ride out behind the dogs to the trap-lines, trusting the dogs to find their own way along in the gloom of mid-day. Without those traps to stimulate ambition, to make us get outdoors, we would have gone mad.

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And then came the sun, rising higher each day until it burst above the horizon in blood-red splendour on the 13th of February, bringing life back to frozen Ellesmere. But always with the coming of the sun the temperature sank still lower. As the sun climbed higher in the sky the thermometer dropped, until March saw day after day brilliantly cold in a temperature ranging from 50 to 60 degrees below zero. It seemed as if we were living in a new world. The spring sunshine flooded the land, cold, almost synthetic, sunshine which only grew warm towards the end of April.

With the winter went a great deal of the almost unbearable monotony. When daylight came it was possible to hunt, to organise exploration trips by sled far along the coast and into the unknown interior, to do some of the things for which ostensibly we were stationed on this vast barren island.

Time was a thing of no importance. Days came and went with hardly a thought for the day of the month or even the day itself. During the winter we usually lost three hours in clock time, correcting the watches by the sun-dial built behind the post as soon as the sun rose high enough in February to cast a shadow. That first year on Ellesmere, before half our number were taken southwards, we lost a day during the winter, and were only corrected when the *Arctic* came in August.

As the spring advanced the sun climbed far up into the sky, so that by mid-April it was light all night, a vast change from the horrible gloom of five months before. In those last nights of April the sun did not go below the actual horizon at midnight, although it lay beneath the towering mountains to the northward. In early May it skimmed the mountain-tops at midnight, repaying with its magnificent splendour all the debts of winter. On June 21st, at the summer solstice, it shone brilliantly in

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the sky 13 degrees above the horizon at midnight, painting the glaciers a delicate rose, and flushing the deep blue sky a beautiful salmon pink along the top of North Devon.

When summer came hours meant nothing on Ellesmere. For nearly four months we knew no such thing as darkness. Night was the same as day, and often as not an expedition would leave the post in the warm light of midnight as in the blinding brilliant sunshine of mid-day.

There was, of course, no police work in the accepted sense of the word to do. We merely understood that the Government desired a garrison on Ellesmere to make good its claim to possession. It was expected that we would explore as much as possible and report each year to Ottawa.

Of Ellesmere itself little was known. The southern and western coast-lines were not mapped until 1900-1 when Captain Otto Sverdrup, the Norwegian explorer, spent two winters in Havn Fiord with the *Fram*. Sverdrup had accomplished wonders during his two years of exploration, but the coast-line was only roughly mapped, and practically nothing known of the interior. The coast for one hundred miles west of Craig Harbour had never been seen by white man.

So it was that with frequent sled trips far along the coast, hunting trips to supply ourselves with fresh meat and to provide food for our ravenous army of dogs, and with quasi-scientific observations, the monotonous weeks and months went by until, one wonderful summer day, the open water lapped again on the shores of Ellesmere Land. And then, in those joyous anxious weeks before the coming of the ship, the bitterness of the past year was forgotten. Life seemed abundant. Gulls and ducks in thousands swam in the sea off the edge of the pack, sleeping seals lay dotted on the ice, and ashore snow-buntings and ptarmigan twittered amongst the rocks.

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When the open water came it was possible to go along the coast in the whaleboat, farther east round rocky King Edward VII. Point to where Coburg Island, looking grim and frozen even in the height of summer, lay between us and Baffin Bay.

Walrus came on their annual migration to Craig Harbour and the fiords along the coast; big seal lay on the large ice-pans as they floated seawards; now and then a whale would spout a mile off-shore, passing through the channel between us and Smith Island; a school of narwhal sometimes passed, and once, almost to our undoing, a squadron of gigantic killer whales thrashed into the harbour and caught us amongst the floe ice two miles off-shore.

Each year, from the tent at the foot of the towering red granite cliffs, we would carry pitch to the summit with which to build a signal fire when the ship should come.

The Sound was never completely open. Of the sixty miles which lay between us and North Devon, forty miles and more lay covered with solid winter ice piled up by the gales and currents on the North Devon shore.

Even in summer there were days when fierce gales from the mountains swept Craig Harbour, days even in July and August when blinding snow-storms drove down from the north-east and obliterated all signs of summer, seeming malevolently to presage the coming of another dark winter but a few short months away.

By the time the ship came the summer was more than half gone. A few weeks after she had called for the all too short annual visit the harbour would freeze again, and before she docked in Quebec the mountains would echo with the crack of dog-whips as the sleds sped over the ice for the floe edge.

The Barren Lands—that is what they called the tundras along the Arctic shore of the mainland hundreds of miles

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to the south. Barren Lands, where one could pick up tons of driftwood on each mile of beach, where trees grew a few miles farther south in the river-bottoms, where there were lakes full of fish, and countless herds of caribou roamed the uplands. The Barren Lands, where in summer Stefansson remarked on the terrible heat, the myriads of mosquitoes. It seemed to us that these should have been called the Barren Lands where even bushes did not grow, these gaunt naked islands where it seemed almost impossible for a living thing to exist.

We had built a shack at Cape Sabine, two hundred and fifty miles farther north on the eastern coast of Ellesmere, a few miles from where Greely and his gallant band starved in 1886. It was from this lonely cache and from Craig Harbour that the Canadian Government expected, and still expects, its three men of the Mounted Police to patrol the top of the world.

A year ago there were but two white men at the Mounted Police post at Craig Harbour. Of these but one, the corporal, could be spared for the 'top of the world' patrol. It meant travelling northwards for three hundred miles with only one Eskimo, twenty-five days of toiling over treacherous glaciers, a brief stay at the cache at Cape Sabine, and a long journey homewards, carried out with untold hardship. And all to place under the cairn of stones at the foot of the glacier at Cape Sabine an empty cartridge case containing a record that the 'top of the world' patrol, ordered by the Government in Ottawa, had been carried out.

But this work is positive, it is something to be accomplished, and accomplishing things is the easiest side of life north of the 76th degree. It is in doing nothing, sitting 'tight' through the long Polar winter, waiting for the sun to come, for the months to pass, and the ship to

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come bringing word of the 'outside,' always waiting, that strains human endurance to the limit. Even now, while the press is booming with polar flights and spectacular 'stunts' across the frozen seas, somewhere on Ellesmere Land three solitary white men wait for the day when, unheralded by newspaper reports and thrilling bulletins, the single yearly relief ship brings twenty-four hours' happiness to the 'top of the world' patrol.

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IX.

ECHOES FROM THE MARSHES (I.).[1]

(Being further Tales of the Ma'adan.)

BLACKMAIL.

It was on one of my infrequent expeditions to Basra that I noticed, lying beside the I.W.T. workshops, a dirty, disreputable, neglected little motor-launch. Its once white paint was brown and blistered, its once shining brass-work black; but none the less I looked at it with covetous eyes. No one else seemed to want it, and, indeed, it was so small that probably no one else could find a use for it. It must have been sent out to this country when the cry was going up for more and more river transport, on the off-chance of its proving useful. And now I hoped to supply the chance; for the greater part of the district of which I was Assistant Political Officer was composed of marshes, hitherto only navigated by native craft—challabiyahs, taradas, mashhufs, as the various types of pitched canoe are called. This tiny launch, with its shallow draught, would enable me to move about much more easily and quickly than before.

To my great satisfaction, I found on applying for the launch that my surmise had been correct. She was 'nobody's child,' and I had no difficulty in getting her allotted to me. It was a very spick-and-span little craft,

[1] Subsequently published in 'Haji Rikkan, Marsh Arab,' St James's Library, Chatto & Windus.

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gleaming with fresh white paint and polished brass-work, which set out a few weeks later on its maiden voyage into the marshes.

This was to be a voyage purely of discovery. I had never been farther than a day's journey into the wilderness of reeds and water, and now I wanted to push straight across the marsh country and see what lay on the other side. My guide was to be my old friend Haji Rikkan; but he frankly considered the object of my journey a childish one.

"More than once," he said, "have I reached the other side in my mashhuf, and there dwelt the same Arabs as ourselves, building the same reed huts and tending the same buffaloes. Why should your honour travel so far for nought? I am ready to swear, by the Three Names of Allah, that this side and the other are as like as two grains of rice."

As I would not be dissuaded, Haji Rikkan decided in his own mind that I had some secret purpose; and it was true that, though really actuated by pure curiosity as to what lay beyond the marshes, I was always glad of an opportunity of seeing more of the Ma'adan themselves.

Secure in their islands among the high reeds, separated from civilisation and an interfering government by miles of unmapped swamp, the marsh Arabs live a life of primitive simplicity and primitive passions perhaps not far removed, except in time, from that lived by their ancestors of the ancient 'Sea Land.' Clad in the minimum of clothing, or in none, the marshman weaves his rush mats, builds his low arched hut and tends his buffaloes; to slay his enemy and to steal whenever a chance presents itself, to rule his daily life strictly according to tribal custom, and to work no more than is necessary for a bare living, is roughly his code of social obligation.

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The Ma'adan of my district seemed to lay special stress on the second of these duties. As daring and successful thieves they were unsurpassed, and the stretch of river running here through marsh country on both sides gave them continual opportunities of stealing from the Government boats which passed up and down. Now I hoped that my new acquisition, the little motor-launch, would enable me to learn more about these people at first hand, and so to discover how best to deal with their thieving propensities.

It was a clear fresh morning of late spring when the launch left the main river and struck into the Shatut Canal, which soon broadened out into wide open stretches of grey-brown water. Here, later in the year, would lie broad green fields of rice, but at present the flood water was still depositing its rich silt, on which the success of the future crop depended.

Gradually, as we went farther and farther from the river, the water became less muddy. We passed thick clumps of gossab, which grew larger and more frequent until they closed us in on both sides, and we found ourselves winding in and out of a tortuous little channel of deep clear water. Hidden securely from the sight of all but the marsh birds, which now and then flapped out of the reeds with angry cries at our intrusion on their peace, we could see nothing ourselves but the thick walls of gossab. This reed furnishes the marsh Arab with his household fuel, and with the material from which he weaves mats to build his house, or to sell, through some such intermediary as Haji Rikkan, to the ordinary tribesman or town-dweller.

Now we felt the fresh breeze again in our faces, for we left the sheltering gossab and came out before a wide stretch of bardi: good grazing for the buffaloes, this,

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and useful too for making ropes, and for placing against the walls of the frail reed huts to keep out the piercing winds of winter. The channel ran straight ahead, as far as the eye could see, as though it had been cut by the hand of man; and I learned some time later that it was indeed a remnant, the sole fragment left through the centuries, of one of the great irrigation canals which of old made Mesopotamia a fertile land. The little launch made her way with difficulty here, for the weeds were thick. Masses of pink-flowered 'jat,' a delicacy highly prized by the buffaloes, clustered round the stems of the reeds, and the surface of the water was completely covered by a tiny white flower, like wild strawberry blossom, which made so thick a carpet of bloom as to hide even its own leaves from sight. Here and there floated placidly the flat dull green leaves of the water-lily, its disappointing little flowers hardly visible.

Now we passed the first group of the small islands, 'ishans' as they are called, on which the marsh Arabs live. They were deserted; only a few mud-ovens, round and smoke-blackened, showed that not long ago they had been busy centres of life. Small wonder is it that, living in such remote fastnesses in homes so easily and quickly moved, the Ma'adan felt safe to raid and rob without fear of reprisals from Government.

The bardi began to give place to mardi, which, in spite of the similarity of the names, is totally unlike its humbler brother. For the mardi is the giant of the marshes, towering above one's head to a height of fifteen or twenty feet, and provides the marsh Arab with the long stout poles with which he propels his mashhuf.

Suddenly breaking through the gloom of these silent, stately monarchs of the 'Hor,' we came upon a wide open sea, blue as the Mediterranean and covered with 'white

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horses.' The wind, which we had not felt in the shelter of the mardi, was here a thorough-going gale, and Haji Rikkan was doubtful about crossing.

"Even danaks,[1] Sahib," he said, "are sometimes overturned in such a wind."

I reassured him as to the seaworthiness of our craft, and though it was clear that he had grave misgivings, he resigned himself, with a pious, "We are all in the hands of Allah!" to the venture. Rocking and tossing, and drenched to the skin with spray, we reached the other side in safety and slid into the calm waters of a channel winding between walls of shabab—the tall reed from which the marshman makes the semicircular framework to support the rush mats of his hut. Only the waving and tossing of their silver feathery heads showed that above our sheltered little channel the wind blew as strongly as before.

Always changing from hour to hour as the little motor-boat penetrated more and more deeply into its heart, yet always the same, the quiet marsh opened its waterways to receive us. Like some Belle Dame sans Merci, it seemed to beckon us on and on, ever revealing fresh beauties, yet ever closing fast the way of retreat. Its towering ramparts rose silently behind us, as though, having once revealed to us the wonders of its inmost hidden life, the marsh would keep us ever in its embrace, lest we should go forth again and tell the secret of its winds and waters to the world outside.

Haji Rikkan was perfectly right: the far side of the marshes was exactly like the side from which we had come. The people differed in one respect only—living as they did far from the great river, they had never seen a motor-launch, or, for that matter, any self-propelled craft.

[1] The largest type of boat used in the marshes.

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Often, in the adventurous dreams of boyhood, I had fancied myself arriving in some unexplored part of the world with a motor-car or some other unknown mechanical contrivance, and pictured the amazement and curiosity of the people. Here, now, the dream was turned to reality. The people crowded to the banks to see, gazing eagerly, their fingers in their mouths. What would they think of this new species of boat, with its humming engine and polished brass? I listened for their remarks.

"Why," asked a puzzled voice, "does he paint his boat with milk?"

It was the only comment I heard. Life is full of disappointments!

. . . . . .

Our return journey next day was uneventful, until Haji Rikkan was moved to try a new route, which, like most short cuts, proved to be anything but short. We were delayed by thick weeds below the surface of the water, and had to stop repeatedly to disentangle the clinging strands from the propeller. The afternoon was drawing on, and it became obvious that we must find a sleeping-place for the night—a village if possible.

At last, getting clear of the weeds, we entered a long straight defile of water between high reeds. We were half-way up it when a birkash [1] entered at the other end. But no sooner did its occupants see us than they seized their rifles, jumped from the boat into the shallow water and dashed into the shelter of the reeds, through which we could hear them pushing and crashing their way. This seemed rather odd: why should two grown men flee in terror from the launch, at the sight of which the marsh-folk of our last night's halting-place had shown only curiosity?

[1] A large mashhuf.

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The deserted craft was loaded with bardi. Were its owners genuinely dismayed at the launch's appearance, or was it a case of guilty consciences? As we slowed up to push the heavy black boat out of our way, I leaned over and pulled aside some of the bardi. Below it I saw four long poles. Without doubt, these were the telephone poles which a few nights earlier had been stolen from beneath the very nose of the sentry at the military post near my headquarters, and of which the disappearance had caused so much stir. I gave orders for the birkash, with its illicit load, to be towed behind the launch.

We had almost given up hope of finding an ishan on which to spend the night, when the sight of half a dozen grazing buffaloes told us that a village could not be far off; and within half an hour the launch was banking in beside a small mound.

Though it was almost sunset, not a man was to be seen in the tiny village. Only a few gaping women watched our arrival, and as I landed another came out of one of the reed huts and advanced to meet me.

"Enter," she said in a harsh clear voice. "Enter, in the name of Allah." Turning to the other women, she gave a string of rapid orders, which they hastened to obey. It was evident that she was accustomed to obedience.

In a very short time I was seated on a pile of rough cushions and provided with the strong sweet tea of Arab hospitality. I learned that the name of my hostess was Awasha, and that she was the wife of Salim, headman of the Bait Aswad. Also I was allowed to gather that this same Salim was decidedly under the thumb of the energetic woman who chatted to me with such friendliness and lack of embarrassment.

A girl entered the hut and whispered in Awasha's ear, and I saw as she glanced hastily at me that a look of fear

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had replaced the confident expression in her eyes. Conversation languished, and she sat opposite to me in constrained silence.

Suddenly she seemed to come to some decision, and, rising to her feet, beckoned me to the far end of the hut.

"Look," she said, and showed me a little hammock made from a piece of sacking on which were plainly marked the letters 'S. & T.'[1] But the letters were nothing to Awasha; she was directing my attention to the tightly-swaddled baby sleeping in the hammock.

"New," she said. Even to my inexperienced eye that was plain.

"Boy or girl?" I asked.

"Boy," she proudly answered; and in reply to my question as to how many more she had, held up her open hand and pushed down the thumb and one finger: three more.

I could think of nothing more to say, but Awasha still stood looking at me expectantly. It was clear that something more was required of me. Suddenly divining what it was, I unknotted the school scarf round my neck and handed it to her as a 'dilla'a' or birth-gift for the baby.

Awasha was delighted. She hastened to the other end of the hut to examine my offering in the better light of the doorway. School colours are usually bright, and mine were no exception to the rule. The vivid stripes appealed tremendously to Awasha. Holding it up close to her eyes, and then at a distance with her head cocked appreciatively on one side, she appeared enraptured.

By this time the look of fear had left her eyes, and inviting me to sit down again on the pile of cushions, she squatted beside me.

[1] Supply and Transport Corps.

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" The men of this Bait," she remarked in a confidential tone, " are poor creatures. I am but a woman, yet I drive them like cattle."

Having noticed her imperious manner towards the other women, I admitted that I was not surprised.

" Why do you take with you a mashhuf full of bardi ? " she went on, and laughed delightedly when I told her what I had found in it.

" I believe you know who stole them," I hazarded.

She laughed again.

" Tell me."

" No, no, I am afraid," she said, though she certainly looked more elated than fearful, and I pressed her again to tell me the names of the thieves.

" If I tell you," she began hesitatingly, " shall I have your protection ? "

I promised that she should come to no harm if I could prevent it.

" On your ' hadha wa bukht '—your word of honour ? "

" On my ' hadha wa bukht.' "

" It was "—a barely perceptible pause—" I. All the men are my servants ; when I am in need I send them forth, to fetch what they can."

" Then that is the reason," I said, " why there is not a single man in the village to-day ? "

She nodded—then hastily added. " You promised on your ' hadha wa bukht.' "

I was silent, wondering how best to deal with this self-confessed instigator of, probably, not a few of the raids and robberies which for so long had disturbed the peace of the district.

" Sahib," said the woman, and her voice was low and caressing, " I say to the men of this Bait, ' Rob,' and they rob ; I say, ' Steal not,' and they do not steal. But if to

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every child I bring forth your honour will give a dilla'a such as this one "—she held up the gleaming square of silk—" then I will say, ' Steal not.' "

This was barefaced blackmail ; but I basely fell in with Awasha's proposal. After all, governments submit far more readily than private individuals to blackmail—in fact, they have a special name for it ; they call it ' granting a subsidy.' Why should not I grant a subsidy to this ruler of a troublesome marsh tribe ? I agreed to send a silk scarf to every babe produced by Awasha.

A dilla'a, it may here be remarked, although the word has come to be used of any present made at birth, is, strictly speaking, the fourfold gift of a blue stone, a twig of difla, a piece of garlic and a gold coin, threaded together and hung on the baby's forehead as protection against the Evil Eye : the first because its bright colour distracts attention from the child itself, the second because of its bitter taste, abhorred of spirits. What virtue is attached to the gold coin I have never discovered, but the explanation of the piece of garlic is simple : it causes the Evil Eye to water, and so lessens its malignity !

. . . . . .

A year or so later, a tall marsh Arab stopped me as I was leaving my office.

" Jabat Awasha," he said simply, " Awasha has brought forth."

She had kept to her bargain. During the whole year, not so much as a breath of suspicion had fallen on the Bait which she controlled with so firm a hand. I promised her messenger to give him the silk scarf on the following morning.

The next year, and the year after that, the same message was brought me, and the same dilla'a sent. After that I left.

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I wonder if Awasha is still 'bringing forth' with the same regularity? I wonder if the three little brown urchins, bedecked with my school colours, are as unpopular as was Joseph of old in his 'coat of many colours'?

HASSAIN CHAOUSH.

A shabanah is (or rather was, for the term is now only a memory) an Arab who, presented by Government with a brass badge, a rifle, twenty or thirty rounds of ammunition and the sum of twenty rupees a month, is placed at the disposal of the Political Officer for the maintenance of law and order in his district. If success can be considered to lie in the prevention of theft by ninety-nine persons, while the hundredth, the shabanah himself, robs with impunity, then the shabanahs were certainly successful; but in the early days of the occupation it was disheartening to have to rely on this sort of irregular gendarmerie.

At one time shabanahs were posted in the trucks of the military supply trains running from Basra to Nasiriyah or Amarah to guard against marauders—until it was discovered that they were apt to push off sacks of barley, sugar or flour as the trains passed their own villages. They were posted on the river transports, to ward off robbers from the marshes—until it became clear that an understanding had been reached by which the marsh Arab would get safely off with his spoil, while the shabanah, by opening fire some time later, would divert suspicion to some perfectly innocent section or village. Little mud forts were erected along the river-bank, and manned by shabanahs with orders to fire on any suspicious-looking strangers; and their habit of levying toll on each and every passer-by was the last of these practices, as it

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was also the most lucrative, to be discovered by the authorities.

Yet, despite all these tendencies, there was good stuff in the shabanahs. They were finely built men, tough as leather and extraordinarily cheerful and willing. Once they were placed under British officers whose whole time could be devoted to them, their good qualities were brought to the fore, while discipline killed off—or perhaps anæsthetised would be the truer word—their bad ones. Thus from the most unpromising material sprang up the very efficient Levy Force of to-day, a force which during the rebellion of last year did remarkably good work, so long as it was under the leadership of its British officers. Even in the early days, however, when the mere prospect of learning to drill was sufficient to make a shabanah bolt in deadly fear of being sent to 'Lun'on' as a soldier, many cases occurred of fine devotion to duty—witness that of Hassain Chaoush—Sergeant Hassain.

I was sitting outside my bungalow one hot sultry evening, lazily watching the river, my eyes fixed on a small black dot which I knew would in a few minutes resolve itself into a slender mashhuf making its way downstream. Idly I speculated as to what it would contain. It would be full of fish, perhaps, caught in the marshes some days ago, and now to be sold to the village Arabs and eaten with great relish in an advanced stage of decomposition; perhaps it was bringing 'shelib,'[1] to be exchanged for the brightly coloured cotton stuffs which the Arab women love; or it might be carrying a cargo of melons grown in some small patch of cultivation beside the river.

In the rays of the setting sun the stream looked like a sheet of flame, and it seemed to my indolent fancy that the

[1] Unhusked rice.

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little mashhuf would be consumed before it reached my bungalow. It was making very slow progress, and downstream too; perhaps the heat of this oppressive evening had affected even the Arab who propelled it. I wondered if he might be my old friend Ahmad, who, fresh from another journey in the marshes with his boat-load of small groceries stored in empty petrol-tins, was coming to gossip with me about the wild tribes he knew so well. Or perhaps a whole family from the rice-fields were fleeing from the relentless oppression of one shaikh, to take up their abode under another who, they hoped, would prove a milder taskmaster; or it might be that shameless profiteer, Jusif, who used to make long journeys into the marshes to buy chickens for next to nothing, and sell them at outrageous prices for use in the military hospitals.

All my surmises were wrong. As the mashhuf floated slowly past the bungalow, the reason of its languid progress was evident: it was empty.

Others beside myself had noticed the drifting boat, and a village boy put off to pick it up. With swift strokes of the paddle he drove his own small craft to the middle of the stream and rose to catch the high prow of the mashhuf. Then, with a shrill cry, he came paddling madly back again.

"Has he seen a tantal[1]?" asked a shabanah standing near me of his companion.

The boy landed not far from where I was sitting.

"Blood, blood!" he screamed, and fled to his hut.

I sent off three shabanahs to bring in the mysterious mashhuf. Lying in the bottom were two dead men; in the body of one was still a long curved dagger, while between them, in strange contrast to those grim still forms, lay a bundle, half-unrolled, of rich orange-coloured

[1] An evil djinn.

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silk. Splashed with blood, crumpled and stained as though it had been clutched and struggled over, its shining folds were still beautiful, gleaming and shimmering in the sunset light—surely of the very essence of temptation to the colour-loving Arab.

The two men were lifted out of the mashhuf. Both wore the brass badge of my little force of shabanahs. The one with the dagger in his side was dead, but the other stirred and groaned as he was moved, and with regret I recognised him as Hassain Chaoush—with regret, apart from pity for his obviously dying condition, for he was one of the few shabanahs in whom I had any real confidence, and I was sorry to see him with that orange silk.

For some time past I had been making efforts to trace a roll of valuable silk which had been stolen from a small steamer carrying civil merchandise up the river. I felt sure that this must be the missing bale ; but how came it to be restored to me in this gruesome fashion, stained with the blood of two of my shabanahs ? This, however, was not the time for conjecture ; I sent for the Sub-Assistant Surgeon stationed in the little town, in the hope that it was not too late to save the life of Hassain Chaoush.

An hour later I was sent for. Hassain had recovered consciousness, and repeatedly asked to see me. Everything possible had been done, but the S.A.S. held out no hopes of his recovery. He thought, nevertheless, that the patient's request had better be granted.

Hassain had evidently been awaiting me with feverish anxiety.

" Sahib," he asked excitedly as I entered, " have you got it ? Have you got the silk ? "

" I have," I answered.

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He drew a long breath and sank back on the bed. "I will explain it all to you, Sahib," he said.

I tried to persuade him to lie still and rest, to let the explanation wait until the morrow.

"No, no, I must tell you now," he said, in such evident anxiety that it seemed best to let him talk. Often pausing to struggle for breath, his hoarse voice sometimes hardly audible, he told his tale.

"Sahib, we had all heard of the lost bale of silk, and your honour gave us all instructions to try to find out who had stolen it. By chance I heard of the thieves, and learned that they were in hiding on an ishan only a short distance into the marshes, waiting for a mahaila [1] to pass on her way up-stream, for they hoped to sell the silk to the nokhada. And I planned to go into the marsh and try to capture it from them, that I might bring it back in triumph to lay before your honour; but I said nothing, for I wished to gain that glory for myself and for Ridha, my cousin, who had agreed to accompany me.

"We left our nuqta before dawn; very quietly and stealthily, hardly moving, we approached the ishan. Peering through the reeds, we could just make out the thieves. Three of them there were; two seemed to be sleeping, the third was on guard with his rifle on the only channel leading up to the ishan. Silently, having seen all we needed to see, we made our way back a long distance and discussed how we could best seize the silk. It seemed impossible: if we went up the channel, however quickly, the man on guard would shoot us; however quietly we crept through the reeds, our movements would be heard; nor could we get near enough to shoot with certainty. At last Ridha said, 'The smaller the noise, the greater the danger; let us make a great noise as of buffaloes grazing.'

[1] The large sailing-boat of the Tigris and Euphrates.

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"So we agreed, and crashed in amongst the reeds, advancing towards the ishan and then retreating a little, but ever drawing nearer and nearer. At last we saw our opportunity and rushed in. Two of the men we killed; the third escaped, and we troubled not to chase him, for there in the bottom of their mashhuf we found the stolen silk. Hastening back as fast as we might, before the third man could bring others against us, we reached the river and set out on our way down-stream, O Hakim, to receive your words of praise and honour."

The hoarse hurried voice ceased, and Hassain drank thirstily from the cup I held for him. But he had more to tell, and would not rest until I had heard it all.

"As we went, Ridha unfolded a little of the silk. It was very beautiful, smooth and shining like the soft cheek of a bride, and there were many dhara'as. Ridha fingered it covetously.

"'By the son of Abi Talib,' he exclaimed, 'have we risked our lives only to give silk such as this, the price of many women, back to the Hakim?' He unfolded more and more. 'It were madness,' he cried, 'to give this up. Is it not ours by right? The Hakim need never know.'

"'Shame and dishonour would be ours,'" I said, and would not agree.

Hassain broke off to cough violently. His voice was growing very weak, and I tried again to persuade him to rest.

"No, no," he protested. "I have not told all yet, Ridha said, 'Let us keep half, then, and restore half to the Hakim.' But I refused, and chided him roughly for his words. Whereupon he grew angry, and snatching at the silk tried to jump from the mashhuf; but I held it fast, and pulled him back. He turned on me and drew his dagger. O Sahib, Sahib, I cannot breathe——"

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Hassain made one more gasping effort at speech: "Did I well, Hakim?" and fell back dead.

Surely someone, in the Valhalla of brave Arabs, gave him the words of praise he longed so much to hear.

TRIMMING THE BALANCE.

The Bait Mahail and the Bait Sagar had for many years been at feud one with the other, but at last peace was to be made between them. The headmen had asked me to be present at the final ceremony, and I had agreed, but only on condition that the said ceremony took place at my headquarters. This was a departure from my usual custom of visiting the tribes in their villages; but in the first place, the marshes in mid-July are not exactly inviting to a European, and in the second place, I was glad of the opportunity of inducing a few of these wild Ma'adan to leave their island fastnesses and see something of the world outside.

I promised the headmen that if they came in to the little town they should be my guests. This must not be interpreted too literally: it simply meant that I arranged with an eating-house keeper in the bazaar to supply everything they needed in the way of food and drink, keeping an account of what they had, and recognising them by the signed pass which each would produce.

The headmen of the two Baits duly arrived. Only one was missing, and it appeared that he had accompanied the others as far as the river-bank; but when it came to boarding the P.S. 4, which I had arranged should pick them up and bring them the twenty odd miles down-stream to the town, his heart failed him and he hastened back to the marshes. Indeed, the journey seemed to have been a great strain on the courage even of the bolder

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spirits, who had held to their purpose, for when the P.S. 4 banked in opposite my bungalow, from the expressions on their faces she might have been a floating tumbril, bearing fifteen or twenty of the Ma'adan to the guillotine.

Some weeks earlier I had sent my Arab assistant out to preside at a peace-making between two quarrelsome Baits; and when the next morning the reconciling of the Bait Mahail and the Bait Sagar was at last complete, I was reminded of his report. "After three hours' tongues fighting between parties," he wrote, "Rayat al Abbas as tied. Conclusion was fasl [1] made, and I fell sick of them and the time was 7.30 P.M."

I too had 'fallen sick' of my guests, and had sent them to the huts of the shabanahs to wait until an up-going steamboat came to take them back.

Suddenly the sultry peace of the afternoon was broken by loud cries and angry shouting. Louder and fiercer grew the noise, and I went out to see what it was all about. On the river-bank, a little way beyond the shabanah lines, a vigorous fight was in progress; the combatants, the headmen of the two Baits between which I had that very morning concluded a solemn peace!

Fortunately they had been forbidden to bring their rifles, which otherwise they would doubtless have used. As it was, they were making good play with sticks and clods of sun-baked earth. With difficulty they were separated by the shabanahs, and with equal difficulty prevented from resuming the battle.

When at length they were divided into two more or less orderly groups, I ordered the casualties to be produced. Each Bait sent forward for my inspection the victims of the scuffle; and one by one, wearing the expressions of men at death's door, they exhibited their wounds.

[1] Agreement.

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I paired them off—a gashed head of the Bait Mahail with a cut cheek of the Bait Sagar, a bruised and blackened eye with a bleeding nose, and so on, until each victim had a partner in woe. At the end there was one man over, a red swollen weal across his back. Angry cries from the Bait Sagar people told me that he was one of their number; they swarmed forward, but I ordered them back, telling them that I would settle the matter myself.

Silence having been restored, I pointed to the paired-off casualties, and told the assembled headmen that their Baits were now on equal terms, with the exception of the man with the wounded back. It only remained for the Bait Mahail to produce one more of their number to undergo such punishment as would sufficiently damage him for me to pair him off with the odd man of the Bait Sagar.

While the headmen still looked a little doubtful and uncomprehending, the matter was settled by two of my shabanahs. One seized the nearest unwounded member of the Bait Mahail, while the other brought down his stick with all his force across his shoulders ; then they marched him triumphantly to stand beside his ' opposite number ' of the Bait Sagar.

It did more than put an end to the fight : it put the headmen of both Baits into high good humour. Suddenly seeing the point, they roared with laughter over this, to them, novel and speedy way of ending a dispute. Honour was satisfied ; they had no excuse to go on fighting ; each Bait had got as good as it had given. Over and over I heard the settlement explained, one greybeard telling another exactly what had happened, only to hear it all related afresh to him as soon as he had finished. The man who had been the unwilling instrument of ending the quarrel was the hero of the hour.

It is remarkable how willingly this sort of arbitrary

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trimming of the balance is accepted, even welcomed, by Arabs. I am afraid I cannot claim originality in settling the present dispute as I did, for some months earlier the Political Officer of a neighbouring division had employed a similar stratagem to avert what might have been a serious tribal fight. The story throws a rather amusing sidelight on the workings of the Arab mind.

According to the terms of his father's will, Shaikh Hatim had to give half a certain horse to the wife of his neighbour, Shaikh Shiyah. In this country, it should be remarked, a horse may be shared by several persons, one man owning a leg, or even a fraction of a leg; so it is not surprising that Hatim found that unwittingly he had already given away to another person the half of this particular horse. As he could not without loss of honour take back a gift, he made the best amends he could to Shiyah by sending him instead a whole horse; this was accepted, and in course of time brought its new owner two foals. Shiyah then heard that the mare of which half should have been his had also borne two foals; and, being of a grasping disposition, he sent a message to Hatim, claiming the second of these as his by right. Naturally, he was reminded that, having accepted a whole horse instead, he had no longer any claim to the first; whereupon he promptly returned to Hatim the mare and her two foals.

Now the return of a gift once accepted is counted by Arabs as a rank insult, and Hatim planned revenge. Living in his territory at the time was a certain Saiyid, who happened to have borrowed from Shiyah, for stud purposes, his famous horse Hargan, known as 'the Shaikh of Horses,' and justly the pride and delight of his master. This horse Hatim seized, and sent to the owner of a date-garden situated on the river which divided his lands from

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Shiyah's, with a letter saying that, as the shaikh had heard that he needed a horse for turning his naur,[1] this one was sent for the purpose; its mane and tail were to be cut, and the price of one hugga of dates (about fourpence) sent to Hatim in payment.

The unfortunate garden-owner found himself in a quandary. Not to use the horse would be to incur the wrath of Hatim; to do so would bring upon his head the vengeance of Shiyah. Finally, he decided to use it, for no broad river separated him from the strong arm of Shaikh Hatim.

Shiyah, as soon as news of this gross insult reached him, called his tribesmen together for a fight. Hatim did the same, and the two parties assembled on the opposite banks of the river. Shiyah had perforce to wait until mashhufs were collected in which to cross his men to the attack, and this delay gave the Political Officer time to act.

Despatching a letter by a swift messenger, he asked Hatim for the loan of the best of his mares, the famous Jumila. Now experience of Turkish times had taught Hatim that a loan to a Government official was in reality a bribe, never to be returned, and having had little experience of the ways of British officers, he was not at all willing to 'lend' Jumila. Still, his insult to Shiyah seemed likely to have more serious results than he had anticipated, and it was desirable to propitiate the Political Officer if possible. He sent off the mare without delay.

As soon as she arrived, the Political Officer set off with half a dozen sowars, and halted at a water-wheel a little way down-stream of the place at which Shiyah was assembling his people. Across the river, the angry tribesmen could see Hargan, the Shaikh of Horses, his mane

[1] Water-wheel for irrigation purposes.

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and tail clipped and his eyes blindfolded with a piece of sacking, plodding round and round in a circle, while the buckets with their load of water came up one by one. Already they were 'making hosa,' threatening vengeance for this intolerable insult to their shaikh, while Hatim's men, on their side of the stream, shouted taunts and invitations to battle.

At the unexpected sight of the Political Officer, Shiyah's men ceased their war-dance, and the shaikh himself hastened to meet him, dismay on his countenance.

"Can you wonder, O Hakim," he began self-excusingly, "that my men will not heed me when I try to restrain them, that they are spoiling for a fight, when they see my horse Hargan, the Shaikh of Horses, toiling at a water-wheel? By Allah, it is a disgrace too heavy to be borne —a disgrace greater than any man has heard of before."

"Disgrace?" said the Political Officer; "how can that be, when Jumila herself, the Queen of Mares, is doing likewise?" He pointed to the water-wheel at which he had halted, where a blindfolded horse was just beginning her monotonous round.

Shiyah stared, ran to look closer, then burst into a great laugh, and hastened to tell his tribesmen.

Thus there was no fighting, but laughter and goodwill on both sides. Hatim presented Jumila to Shiyah, who acknowledged the gift by the present of Hargan; and for at least six months there was friendship between the two shaikhs—almost a record, as friendship between shaikhs is reckoned!

. . . . . .

The boat which was taking my guests away arrived an hour later. As it moved off, I could see them still chuckling over the events of the afternoon, still relating the

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story one to another, and I laughed at the simplicity of these children of the marsh. But he laughs loudest . . .

Two or three days afterwards I was presented with a bill, the size of which made me open my eyes. Could a score of people, even if they were Ma'adan, possibly have eaten so much in the space of two days ? A few inquiries showed that my doubts had not been groundless. My "simple children of the marsh," after making hearty meals themselves, had loaned out their passes, for a small consideration, to others not of their number, until such time as they felt capable of themselves making another attack on the provisions !

Verily are Arabs and Jews alike the sons of Shem !

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X.

ECHOES FROM THE MARSHES (II.) [1]

(Being further Tales of the Ma'adan.)

THE MOTHER OF GOLD.

I GLANCED at the clock and hastily signed the remaining papers on my table, for it was already a quarter to nine and I had promised to meet Braxter at 8.30. I was just preparing to leave the office when there appeared in the doorway the large square figure of Lieut.-Colonel W. F. Cunningham, C.M.G., D.S.O., of Headquarters, L. of C. (that is not his real name). It was not often that he honoured me with a visit, but my work in connection with river raids had more than once brought me into touch with him.

The Colonel was obviously bursting with indignation and lost no time in explaining the reason. During the night his launch had been boarded by thieves, who had made off with a leather dressing-case, containing not only a valuable gold-mounted toilet set, but a small despatch box of valuable documents. It appeared that he had taken every care, had posted a sentry, had even anchored out in mid-stream—which last precaution, I could not help remarking, was not likely to be very effectual, seeing that the Ma'adan are practically amphibious.

He brushed my remark aside. Would I kindly make

[1] Subsequently published in 'Haji Rikkan, Marsh Arab,' St James's Library, Chatto & Windus.

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every effort to recover the case, or, failing that, exact a fine of Rs. 500, the estimated value of its contents—exclusive, of course, of the important papers, for which no price could be fixed.

I promised to do my best, and asked where exactly the theft had occurred.

"Between Hamdan and Gurmat Shargi," replied the Colonel.

I reminded him that by his own orders all boats were prohibited from stopping for the night in that reach of the river, owing to the number of successful thefts which had already occurred there.

The Colonel flushed, and said shortly that he had not come to be told what he should have done, but to tell me what I should do—to wit, find his lost property, in which not very hopeful task I assured him I would do everything in my power to succeed.

Braxter, who was attached to the neighbouring military post, was not in the least annoyed at being kept waiting. He was—for he is dead now, poor fellow!—a very sound doctor and a keen archæologist. Some time ago I had promised to take him on my next trip into the marshes, where the ishans on which the marsh Arabs live, and which appear to be the remains of ancient cities, offered a rich and as yet virgin field to the excavator. As a condition, I had stipulated that he should bring along his medicine-chest.

Our mashhuf, poled by my four best mashhufchis—Halshad, Mashraf, Fadhal and Mujaid—slipped out of the mud-coloured river into the clear blues and greens of the marshes. It was a lovely autumn morning, with the first cold nip in the wind, and the marshes showed us their most attractive side. They were full of interest to Braxter, who was one of those fortunate persons who seem to know

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something of everything. Except for the shootable varieties, I had never particularly noticed the birds in the marshes; but Braxter was continually pointing out new varieties as they flapped out of the reeds, or fled with shrill cries before the mashhuf.

We stopped at the first little village, and Braxter administered a number of powerful draughts. The people were most anxious to be given treatment, and regarded the innovation of my being accompanied by a doctor on my visits as a most welcome one. When, a couple of hours later, we reached another cluster of reed huts, we found—so swiftly does news travel in the marshes—that the villagers were already anxiously awaiting us, or rather the medicine-chest, and Braxter had his hands full.

All this took time, and in consequence it was well on in the afternoon before we reached the ishan which I wanted my companion to see—Umm Dhahb, the Mother of Gold, so called because on several occasions gold coins had been found there.

The low mound rose out of its fringe of reeds, sloping gently to a height of perhaps fifty feet above the level of the surrounding water. How many centuries had slipped silently away since the marsh had engulfed and hidden for ever the city that once reared its dwellings and its temples here? Were they Sumerians who built it, savage folk who only left their homes in the sea-land to attack the Babylonian intruders in the north? Or was it the work of peaceful cultivators of a later age, growing rich in the wheat country made fertile by the irrigation schemes of Babylon, until the great river, suddenly changing its course as it has done more than once in the course of history, submerged lands and cities beneath the waste of water which to-day makes almost impregnable the

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island homes of the Ma'adan? I did not know, and Braxter could not tell me.

Umm Dhahb was a favourite burying-ground among the marsh Arabs, with the result that, though no scientific excavations had ever been carried out here, many fragmentary remains had been cast up by the grave-diggers. The ground was strewn with broken pottery, most of it glazed the bright blue of a thrush's egg. Here and there lay shapeless masses of masonry, covered with a rich dark-green glaze, the whole looking as though it had been subjected to intense heat. Near the summit we found traces of a series of small arches, and, not far away from them, what seemed to be the foundation of some great wall. The bricks, mud-coloured and flat, and some two feet square, were joined together with a mortar which resembled that of the Romans in its tenacity and strength.

Braxter was anxious to find some more of the coins which the Arab grave-diggers occasionally unearthed, and perhaps from them to gain some idea of the date of the mound; but as the sun was already sinking we had to make our way back to the river. I suggested to the two headmen who had accompanied us from the village that, as some small return for the doctor's kindness, they should on the morrow take a party of their Bait to dig on Umm Dhahb, and send him any gold coins which they might find.

Radhi, an old man with the fine rugged face of a St Peter in a mediæval painting, promptly untied a corner of his kafiyah and proffered a Turkish lira. I explained that the doctor did not want payment, but that he was interested in Umm Dhahb, and would like to have a piece of gold such as had been found there before. Somewhat puzzled, the headmen agreed to do as I suggested.

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A few days later four men from the Bait Suwailim appeared in my office and laid on the table a curiously shaped round object made of gold. I picked it up and looked at it.

" Where did you find this ? " I asked.

" For a whole day, O Hakim, we dug on Umm Dhahb, and found nothing," said the spokesman. " Then also a second day we dug, and not until the morning of the third day did Allah reward our toil ; and what we found we have brought to your Honour."

He pointed to the object in my hand. I was regarding it with mixed feelings, for it bore a complicated monogram, of which the initials were W.F.C. !

I thanked the deputation, on behalf of the doctor, for their industry in digging.

" But before you go," I added, " I must inform you that your Bait is fined Rs. 500 for stealing a box of leather from a launch."

There was an amazed silence, broken only by the youngest of the four men. " How did you find out ? " he stammered.

The others scowled him into silence.

" I know all," I said, feeling rather like Sherlock Holmes unravelling a plot for the benefit of his dear Watson. " You greased your body all over, you swam out to the launch with a dagger in your teeth, you climbed on board and stole a box of leather. Inside it were many bottles such as the doctor had, and from one of these you took the golden top and brought it to me." I held it up accusingly.

The consternation on their dark faces was rather ludicrous. At last, " This is a very heavy fine, Sahib," said one. " If we bring back the box with all that is in it, will your Honour let us off the five hundred rupees ? "

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"I will let you off half," I said.

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A week later Colonel Cunningham's missing dressing-case was brought in, together with the fine of Rs. 250. I checked its contents by the list he had given me. Nothing seemed to be missing.

The man chosen by the Bait to bring it to me was old Radhi.

"Why did you send that piece of gold for the doctor?" I asked him.

"Hakim," he answered, "at your orders we dug all day on Umm Dhahb, and when we found nothing but bricks and pieces of blue stone some were for giving up. But we were grateful to you and to the doctor for the good medicine given to us and to our children, and we agreed to dig one more day. Still we found nothing. Then said Hamud, 'The Sahib desires a piece of gold dug up from this ishan to keep off evil spirits. Let us bring hither a piece of gold and bury it to-night. To-morrow we will dig it up and send it to the Hakim.' And this seemed to all of us a good thought, and we did as Hamud had said, and brought the gold to your Honour, and you fined us heavily. Long and hard we worked, Sahib. You can see the great depth of our digging, though we are not cultivators accustomed to toil with spades. Also our women point their fingers and mock us, saying, 'You buried the piece of gold to be a safeguard against evil spirits, and behold the evil fortune it has brought you!' It is very hard," concluded old Radhi pathetically, "to be made a mock of by our women."

I laughed, remitted the fine and sent him home. Then I packed up the dressing-case and despatched it to its owner by the hand of one of my shabanahs, who brought me back, rather to my surprise, a charming letter, in

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which the Colonel hoped that his annoyance at losing the case had not made him over-hasty, thanked me for my trouble in recovering it and confessed that the 'valuable documents' were letters from his wife!

THE DEBTOR.

Saiyid Fakhir entered my office bearing a pile of petitions. To keep up the dignity of his title of 'Commissionaire of Police,' he had somehow obtained an officer's khaki tunic, which, several sizes too big for him as it was, looked bigger than ever by contrast with his exceedingly tight pair of trousers, the discarded garments of some 'Tommy.' Round his legs were wound a pair of ragged puttees, which vanished inside enormous ammunition boots. The only part of his attire in which he had remained faithful to the custom of his country was his head-dress, the usual kafiyah and agal of the Arab—the former dyed indigo blue to mark him a Saiyid, or descendant of the Prophet. So dressed, his lugubrious countenance making him appear always on the verge of tears, Saiyid Fakhir was a figure to provoke a smile even when the depressing south winds of midsummer were at their worst.

The Commissionaire of Police regarded me mournfully.

"Praise be to Allah," he said; "thanks to the presence of your Honour, the town has slept in peace and security."

This was Saiyid Fakhir's matutinal greeting, and meant precisely nothing. Whatever calamities he might go on to report—fire, murder or theft—his opening formula was ever the same.

I waited for any further announcements.

"Talib, son of Abdul Wahab," he went on, "is still in custody. It is true that the violence has left him, but his madness remains. If your Honour agrees, I will keep

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him in the prison awhile, lest he do further hurt to the sons of Adam."

I agreed, for in the absence of lunatic asylums no other method of dealing with these unfortunates presented itself.

"His wife has come in to the town," continued Saiyid Fakhir, "beseeching that he may be released. I bade her send a petition to the Hakim. It is among these I have now brought to your Honour."

He put the papers on my table, and with a clumsy salute left the room, to inspect the force of nineteen policemen and one ombashi, or corporal, which acknowledged his gloomy rule.

I looked through the petitions until I found the one to which he had referred.

"That which had to be put before your Excellency" (it began with the invariable formula), "the husband of the petitioner, Talib bin Abdul Wahab, became mad three weeks ago because he was indebted to Abbas, and he is now in prison. The petitioner therefore requests the high Governor, of his justice and mercy, to set free the said Talib, that she may take him to Abbas, where he will be released from his madness. And the order is your order."

Every Arab had the right to 'throw,' as the phrase is, a petition to the political officer of the district in which he lived. The only stipulation made was that the document should bear an eight-anna stamp—a regulation designed in the first place to prevent an unnecessary number of frivolous petitions from reaching one. But when the tribesmen discovered that justice was no longer a commodity to be purchased by the highest bidder, but could be obtained by rich and poor for the same small sum, they bombarded their political officers with petitions to such an extent that the sale of eight-anna stamps,

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in a very short space of time, was bringing in to the Revenue Department a sum as useful as it was unexpected.

It was a strange kind of justice which the tribesman got—a hybrid of public-school fair play and tribal custom—but it suited these wild sons of the marsh or desert. Though rough and ready, it was final; moreover, it was prompt, and, above all, cheap. No fees were needed for barrister, solicitor or their Arab equivalents. A man wrote—or, as a rule, paid some mulla in the bazaar to write—his petition, affixed his stamp, and in due course appeared before the political officer, to be assisted, advised or admonished, according to the nature of his grievance.

Every morning I dealt with a number of these petitions. Nothing was too great a matter or too small—cases of murder, arson, rape, theft or divorce were dealt with as they came, together with questions relating to the recovery of debts, complaints against husbands addicted to wife-beating, or requests for the punishment of persons who had spoken disrespectfully of the petitioner's ancestors. One by one the seekers after justice were called into the office—a bare whitewashed room, in which a punkah made of green cloth of hideous design swung slowly overhead. Behind my desk a wide window looked out on to the river and the cool shadows of the date-garden on the opposite bank. Above it, in the space between the wall and the mouldering wood-work, lived a colony of bats, whose querulous squeaks would strive in vain to rival the punkah's dismal creaking, which all the oil of the A.P.O.C. was powerless to prevent.

The petitioners belonged to every shade of rank and class in the district; but, purely as petitioners, they fell into two or three rough divisions. There were those who came in with honeyed phrases on their lips and made a

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great ado of kissing one's hands, or even feet. I found that I was always prejudiced from the first against these. Before the case began I had decided against them, so that in the effort not to be influenced by any bias, I would give them, in the end, a more lenient judgment than perhaps they deserved, with the result that they gained their ends, though by a very different method from the one they thought they were pursuing.

To another category belonged those who considered themselves of the 'Ashraf,' the 'upper classes' of the community. These would enter the office with a hurt and injured air, greatly resenting the fact that, as was often the case, the petition of some lowly fellah or cultivator was the cause of their being summoned there. Offering me the stateliest and most polite of greetings, they would seat themselves on the tall benches round the walls and would appear still more deeply injured when the low-born petitioner was also bidden to sit down. The Arab mind is very slow to grasp the fact that in the eyes of the law all men are equal.

The great majority of cases concerned the simple tribesman. He would enter, touch my hand with his, carry his own to his lips and kiss it. Then, at a word, he would squat down on the floor in front of me, and with straightforward look and word begin his story—a plain unvarnished tale told simply, with no attempt at seeking for euphemisms or disguising the cruder aspects of life.

I remember on one occasion an old army friend of mine, chancing to pass through the little town, came into my office one morning during the trial of three or four tribesmen.

"My dear chap," he said, "you will never instil any discipline into these fellows if you let them sit about like

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that. You should make them stand in front of you in a proper manner."

I said nothing, for on first leaving my regiment and becoming a political officer, I too had expected petitioners to stand stiffly before my table, and had in my own mind put the Arabs down as an inarticulate, stiff-tongued race. But experience taught me that these same Arabs, once squatting on the floor in the immemorial attitude of their race, became ready of speech and even eloquent.

But this is a digression—though, as a matter of fact, the time it takes to read is probably no longer than the time I spent in puzzling over the document before me.

I called in the petitioner. A small black-shrouded figure entered and sat down in front of my table. I asked her to explain the meaning of her petition, for it had conveyed little to me ; and in the plaintive sing-song accents of the Arab woman, she began her story.

" May Allah lengthen your years and increase your prosperity ! I have been to the doctor, but he did not understand my words, and thought I was becoming even as my husband, whom because of his madness your Honour has shut in the prison. But if the Hakim will listen, I will make all clear, and my husband will be cured of his affliction.

" May Allah preserve you ! The reason of his madness goes back to many years ago, when he was but a new-born babe. For his father had married four wives, and was still childless, and the people mocked him ; but when at last he took a fifth wife, she brought forth a son. And as soon as he was born, his father lifted him high above his head, saying, ' Thanks be to Allah, who at last has blessed me with a son ! Now I swear that he shall visit the great Abbas ; with his necklet and earrings he shall pay honour to the tomb of the Avenger.' "

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The woman had gained confidence as she told her story, and the black abba covering her head was pulled a little aside. I saw a face remarkable for the smallness of its features—tiny mouth and nose, and small dark eyes. It seemed the face of a child, but it bore the traces of sorrow and toil, and the expression was that of a middle-aged woman. In each nostril she wore a gold ring set with small blue stones, and her face was ornamented, after the Arab fashion, with indigo marks—a line above the eyebrows and a short vertical stroke from the lips to the point of the chin.

"But my husband was yet a child," she went on, "when his father died; and though he is now forty years of age he has never performed the vow made in his name. So at last Abbas has grown angry and has made him mad. But if I could but take him to the tomb, that his father's oath might be fulfilled, the anger of the Avenger would be appeased, and my husband would be himself once more."

"How long has he been mad?" I asked.

"May Allah give you power to overcome your enemies! About a month past I and his mother noticed that he sometimes could not bring his lips to utter the words he wished to speak. And one night he awoke me from sleep, and he was trembling in every limb.

"'Sodanah, Sodanah,' he cried, 'I have dreamed that Abbas is angry with me, wrathful because I have not visited him as my father vowed I should.' And he kissed me from my forehead to my feet, and swore not to shave his head until he had been to the tomb of Abbas.

"But the next day he wandered away from the village. And when he saw any man coming towards him, he would run weeping and kiss him, crying, 'Ah, Abbas, friend of our beloved Ali, I have come to fulfil my vow.' Still he

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did harm to no man, until one day a stranger struck him as he tried to embrace him ; and from that time my husband's madness made him fierce and wild, so that he would suddenly strike other men, and for that reason has he been cast into prison.

" Hakim," she continued earnestly, " I beg your Honour now to order his release, that I may take him to Abbas, where the madness will depart from him."

" But the journey to Kerbela is a long one," I said, " and you are a woman, weak and small. How could you prevent him from attacking others, or even yourself, if the madness came upon him ? "

" Ah, Sahib (may Allah guard you !)," she said quickly, " I have thought of that, and the husband of my sister has promised to accompany us and to keep him under his care. And for the money, I will sell my bed and my jewels—all I have I will gladly sell, that my husband may be restored. Only one golden lira will I keep, and he shall throw it to Abbas at the tomb. Then surely the Father of the Hot Head will no longer be angry, and my husband will return with me at peace."

Are the days of faith-cures over ? In the face of the woman's unfaltering confidence, I could not refuse to let her try her plan. Sending for Saiyid Fakhir, I ordered him to release Talib as soon as his brother-in-law arrived to take charge of him ; and, with tears of gratitude streaming down her face, the woman kissed my hand, calling down every blessing of Allah on my head

. . . . . .

Some weeks later I saw her again.

" No," she said, in answer to my question. " He is still mad. Doubtless Abbas is angry that he delayed so long. He will not lightly pardon those forty years during which the vow was unfulfilled. But in time, insha Allah,

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he will repent ; and next year, when I have saved enough to take my husband again to the tomb, perhaps it will seem to the Avenger that he has been punished enough, and the madness will be lifted from him."

I should like to know whether Abbas, Father of the Hot Head, Giver of Water to the Thirsty, the Father of Graciousness, has yet relented.

THE OATH.

I owe a debt of gratitude to the bones of Ali, son of Musa.

A political officer, when a crime was committed in his district, had to assume in succession a number of varied rôles. It was his duty first, as investigator, to endeavour to trace the criminal ; that done, he became prosecutor ; in the third place, as jury he decided whether the man were innocent or guilty ; and finally, in the capacity of judge, passed sentence. It was in the first of these rôles, on which all the rest depended, that I was so often helped by Ali bin Musa, or rather by the sanctity of his bones.

Arabs are inveterate liars. They are ready to swear falsely the most solemn oaths—by their honour, by their Prophet and by their God. But there are certain holy shrines which the superstition, or faith, of generations has credited with such powers that no Arab will swear a false oath by them, and of these shrines that of Ali bin Musa is one.

In spite of the unbounded reverence in which his tomb is held, this Ali does not seem to have been an important figure historically, and it is not easy to find out anything about his life. A number of rather uninteresting miracles are attributed to him, but his fame consists chiefly in reflected glory from the great names of his brother, Ali

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al Ridha, whose shrine in Persia is a well-known place of pilgrimage, and his father, who gives his name to the famous mosque and quarter of Baghdad, Kadhimain.

Nevertheless, thousands of pious Muslims flock every year to the shrine of Ali. He is buried close to the river, in a lonely spot far from any town. The blue dome, rising from the midst of its group of willows, is a welcome sight to the traveller whose eyes are weary of the dull brown banks and barren desert between which the river winds for so many featureless miles. The willows are fine old veterans, thick-trunked, with widely spreading branches. Beneath their shade sit the pilgrims, a strange picturesque assembly, gathered together from who knows where at the call of a common faith.

The people sit in little groups. Four or five families, perhaps, have travelled together, and babies, chickens, cooking-pots, here and there a sheep or two, are all dumped indiscriminately on the patch of ground which they have chosen for their camp. Towards sunset the men may be seen sitting in a little company apart, smoking usually in silence, while the women prepare the evening meal. Each family has its own fire of sticks, and in the light of the leaping flames the bright reds and greens of the women's garments show in vivid contrast to the sombre black 'shailas' on their heads. The children's brown bodies, unhampered by any clothes unless the merest tattered rag, shine roundly in the firelight, and their shrill voices echo in the still evening air. By the river-bank are moored the mashhufs in which the pilgrims have travelled, the graceful lines of their tall curved prows silhouetted, black and sharp, against a background of curling blue smoke and ruddy firelight.

Ali's tomb, however, is not the resort of pilgrims only. Its value to the political officer lies in the fact that to it

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may be sent any suspected criminal. If he swears on the sacred shrine that he is an innocent man, he is treated as such, and the prosecution is dropped. If he refuses to go, he is considered to have as good as admitted his guilt, and is punished accordingly. How useful the bones of such holy men were, perhaps still are, to those whose lot it is to administer justice throughout Mesopotamia is shown by the following example—one of many, but clear in my memory, because it was the first occasion on which Ali bin Musa had come to my assistance.

The convalescent stages of sand-fly fever are not usually marked by any great amiability of temper on the part of the patient; and when my servant announced that Saiyid Fakhir, accompanied by a Basrawi, or townsman of Basra, wished to see me, I concluded that only a bribe of some magnitude could have induced him to worry me with a petitioner at this time. A large bribe indicated important business—important, anyhow, to the Basrawi; and, if only by way of diversion from the dulness of lying in bed, I decided to have him in.

The petitioner, Jaafer, was a stout and portly merchant, very hot and nervous, and in great distress of mind. He had hardly entered my room before he burst into a torrent of explanation. So hurried and incoherent was he that I caught no more than a word here and there. Buffaloes, starving wife and children, stolen liras, the justice of the great British Government, were jumbled together in a hopeless maze of words, and before I had gathered the drift of his story, the unhappy Jaafer had broken into loud sobs, and was wiping away copious tears with the ends of his kafiyah.

My 'Commissionaire of Police' came to the rescue with a brief explanation. Jaafer, with intent to grow rich quickly, had borrowed £T400, meaning to buy buffa-

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loes and sell them at a profit. He had then come to the rice-growing lands of my district, where buffaloes abound, in order to purchase from the cultivators and from their wilder cousins, the Ma'adan. He had stayed in one of the villages, and on his third night, while the preliminaries of bargaining were still going on, the four hundred liras had been extracted from under his pillow, the thief or thieves getting away successfully.

The unwritten tribal law in a case of this sort is curiously like that of many European hotels. If Jaafer had handed over his gold to the headman, one Haji Sa'ad, in whose village he was staying, the latter would have been responsible for its safety. But the suspicious townsman had told no one of his money, though many of the villagers, knowing his errand, must have guessed that he had it, and in gold too, for in those days paper money was not accepted by the tribes-people.

I gave the Basrawi very little encouragement in his hope of recovering the money lost through his own foolishness. At the same time, I resolved to do all I could to trace the criminal, for every uncaught thief is an encouragement to other law-breakers. Getting rid of the disconsolate merchant, therefore, I dictated a letter to Shaikh Shibal, in whose land the village was situated, ordering him to come in and see me.

In Turkish times the various shaikhs retained their large tracts of land as long as they paid up the very high revenue demand of the Ottoman Government. Inter-tribal fighting, so long as money went to Constantinople, was rather encouraged than otherwise, since it kept the great shaikhs weak. But in the early days of our occupation, when the security of the lines of communication was of primary importance, and any tribal disturbance to be avoided, these tracts of land were given out to the

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same holders (or, if the shaikh himself had fled to the Turks, to his most suitable relative), and were leased at a merely nominal figure, on the sole condition that the shaikh was entirely responsible for law and order in his area.

My former dealings with Shibal had not prepossessed me in his favour. The effect of his fine features and commanding figure, his beard dyed black by applications of henna and wasma, and his deep sonorous voice, was spoiled by the shifting restless eyes which proclaimed him a coward both morally and physically. Our interview on this occasion was short. I informed him of the theft, reminded him that, as shaikh, he was responsible for law and order in his territory and that he must therefore refund the stolen money and deal himself with the thief.

"I am a true servant of Government," he replied smoothly. "Every order given by your Honour is upon my head. But, Sahib, is this your well-known justice? Does your Excellency give credence to every story brought by lying tongues? Doubtless this townsman gambled away the money in the bazaar, and to save himself from the wrath of his master who had entrusted it to him, spread this tale of theft and robbery."

"Jaafer can bring witnesses," I said, "to prove that he had the money in the village of Haji Sa'ad."

"Sahib," replied the shaikh, "it is known to your Honour, better even than to me your servant, that for two krans an Arab will swear a false oath."

"As many did in the case of Ferhan," I said. The shot went home, for some time ago Shibal had been mixed up in a very doubtful case, from which he had only extricated himself by paying false witnesses.

"Ma yukhalif,"[1] he said, shrugging his shoulders.

[1] No matter.

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" If this townsman will swear on the tomb of Ali bin Musa that such a sum was indeed stolen as he says, I will pay him what he lost from my own pocket."

Jaafer was despatched accordingly, accompanied by a representative of the shaikh, to the tomb of Ali, where he was only too willing to swear to having been robbed of a sum of £T380 in gold, and Rs. 45 in silver. Shibal was as good as his word. Without any delay he sent in the required sum of money, which I handed over to the merchant.

The surprise on the plump countenance of Jaafer was amusing to behold. He had had little hope at first of ever recovering his money ; and when he heard that Shaikh Shibal had sent it in, he quite expected that a large proportion would stick to the fingers of myself or of my office staff as compensation for our trouble. Now he received the whole amount, and left the office wearing the oddest expression of mingled bewilderment and gratification.

Thus, with all due thanks to the bones of Ali, the case was settled—or so I thought. But my self-congratulations were short-lived. Haji Sa'ad, headman of the village in which Jaafer had been robbed, came in to see me, bearing his petition in his hand. He was a pleasant-faced, dignified old man, with an honest expression and straightforward manner, very different from the oily smoothness of his shaikh.

The reason of Shibal's willingness to pay up the stolen money was soon apparent. He had applied to the headman under him the principle which Government had applied to him, and had held Haji Sa'ad responsible for the theft committed in his village. Accordingly, he had made no effort to trace the thief, but had simply confiscated from Haji Sa'ad a number of buffaloes to the value

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of £T400. The unfortunate headman, thus suddenly, through no fault of his own, deprived of his all, now appealed to a beneficent and merciful Government to restore his buffaloes.

"Hakim," said the old man earnestly, "your Honour knows that the robbing of a guest brings bitter disgrace upon us. If this Jaafer had entrusted his wealth to me, all would have been well; but, even though I knew not how great a sum he had, I would pay it back in full, rather than that dishonour should come upon my village. But, Sahib, the sum is too large. Our shaikhs"—he dropped his voice—"are tyrannous, and leave us barely enough for the needs of life. And now Shibal, to repay this theft, has taken away all my buffaloes, and I am ruined. I beseech your Honour to save me from this injustice."

I was sorry for Haji Sa'ad, but I hardly felt in a position to help him much, owing to Shibal's cunning move. If I ordered him to restore the buffaloes, on the ground that his lands were granted him at an absurdly low figure on the sole condition that he alone was responsible for order, his reply might well be that he, in his turn, adopted the same principle in dealing with those under him—a statement which, however sure one might be that he was in reality grinding out their last penny, was difficult to disprove; for we were still new to the country, and moreover at this time, when matters were looking very black round Kut, our policy was one of non-intervention between the shaikh and his tribes.

It was clear that I could do nothing for the old man, short of recovering the money somehow from the thieves themselves. I told him to go back to his village and send out men to make full inquiry as to any stranger who might have been seen in the neighbourhood at the time of Jaafer's visit.

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A week later Haji Sa'ad came back, not very hopeful, to inform me that a certain Daghar, a man of doubtful reputation belonging to the Metafar tribe, had been seen not far from the village on the day before the theft. Inquiries had shown that he was absent from his home, and was said to have taken a long journey over a fasl case, into that part of the country still under Turkish domination.

This was not much to go upon. I had no proof that Daghar was guilty, nor had I the man himself to interrogate; and heartily I wished that I had never given Haji Sa'ad's buffaloes to the fat Basrawi—for that was what it amounted to. Hoping, Micawber-like, that something would turn up, I sent the old man home, telling him to be ready to come in when sent for.

Nothing did turn up, however, except an idea in my mind that, as Ali bin Musa had lent a hand once in this case, he might do so again. Accordingly, I called in the headmen of the Metafar tribe, who were living under a neighbouring shaikh, and told them that a member of their Bait, by name Daghar, was suspected of stealing £T400.

Loud were their denials and indignant their protestations of complete ignorance of any such robbery.

Were they prepared to swear, I asked, that they knew nothing of it?

Still louder cries of outraged innocence greeted the question.

"A curse be upon me if I am even acquainted with this man Daghar," cried one.

"W'Allah wa b'Illah wa t'Illah—I know nought of the matter," swore another, while a third lifted hands of pious horror to heaven.

Waiting until the hubbub had subsided, I played my only card. Either they must swear, at the tomb of the

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holy son of Musa, that they knew nothing of the theft, or one of their number must remain in prison until the culprit and the money were produced.

Ali did not fail me. Amid silence and downcast looks one of the headmen spoke.

"We cannot swear," he said.

"Then you," I answered, pointing to the man nearest me, "must stay in jail while the others return to send me the thief and the money."

"Let me stay in his stead," said one of the others.

"Why?" I asked, and the answer was a definite admission.

"Daghar is my cousin, and will be willing more readily to restore the money on my behalf."

The headmen departed, and a few days later produced before me the thief, and a bundle of coins tied up in a red-checked kafiyah. Daghar was a good-looking scoundrel, tall and well set up. He smiled engagingly, showing a flawless set of white teeth, when I asked if he had had any other motive for the theft than that of mere cupidity.

"What would you?" he said. "My father was a thief, and my grandfather and the grandfather of my grandfather. But now, O Hakim," he added, making a virtue of necessity, "I have brought back what I stole."

I let him off lightly, for I always had a feeling that it was taking a mean advantage to inflict full punishment on a man whom I could not have convicted without supernatural assistance. But the sanctity of Ali's bones had none the less availed to settle the case satisfactorily, from the point of view of everyone concerned. Jaafer's loss had already been made good. Shaikh Shibal now returned the confiscated buffaloes to Haji Sa'ad, and in

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his turn was compensated by the money retrieved from the thief—and all was well.

> " The evil that men do lives after them,
> The good is oft interred with their bones."

Certainly, in a sense other than that intended by Mark Antony, the second line is true of Ali bin Musa !

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XI.

THE SILVER HAND OF ALEXANDER.

I.

THE golden road to Samarkand . . .

Khiva, Bokhara, Samarkand, Tashkent, Kashgar, Lanchow—rough uncut jewels strung on that long, thin, golden thread which drew the wealth of India and the silks and porcelain of far-off Cathay to Europe, from times remotely B.C. till the day when Vasco da Gama sailed round Africa and opened the sea-route to the East. Each package packed small, to sling on a camel, and each indescribably valuable. No bulk. Months on long months of careful travelling and handling, and then the markets of Byzantium and the West. The overland route of Serindia.

The cities strung along that route waxed fat and golden: by the trade in which they shared; by the transport which they supplied, the lean beasts bought cheaply from the caravans, the beasts fat from the lush grazing of the oases supplied in their place; medicaments for trail-worn man and beast; and the vast army of cooks, vintners and panders who ministered to men fresh from the desert, and who give even modern Bokhara a name all its own; a reputation which, in ancient times, must have made even the Cities of the Plain look to their laurels.

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Nobody knows how the safeguarding of that route was managed. It is a marvel not that the trade was as constant as it was valuable, but that the caravans ever got through in safety. For, from the Caspian to the point where the last Chinese outposts clung to the extension of the Great Wall, the whole route lay past the lands of the Mongol Tartars.

Now the first record there is of the Tartars is from Alexander the Great. He, of Macedon, inherited Philip's ambition for a hegemony of the Greek peoples, and a counter-attack on the hereditary enemy, Persia. He crossed the Hellespont, and in three historic battles and a long advance lasting four years, smashed Darius, and, with him, Nineveh, Babylon and the whole Empire of Persia.

He strode over the ruins of Persia into the north-east. Herát, the gateway-fortress of the eastern valleys, he took in his stride. Crossing the Hindu Kush, he made one fat mouthful of Samarkand, Bokhara and their dead-weight of riches. Beyond them lay the desert, and the incalculable fluid tribes of stunted warriors which peopled it. He crossed the Jaxartes, and launched out into the wilderness. The historians say little of what happened; his own chroniclers are silent, and the whole episode is very obscure, but presently he returned, licking his wounds, pensive.

Whatever it was that happened was shortly forgotten in his matchless conquest of the obstacles which lay between him and the plains of India. But it takes little imagination to see the Macedonian phalanx lumbering slowly through the sand, stung and exasperated by clouds of mounted archers who appeared and disappeared at will, and whose very real numbers must have seemed multiplied tenfold by their ubiquity. Undoubtedly they

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were too much for him. They chased him out of their country, hardly knowing, and little caring, who it was that they were chasing.

Thereafter, silence.

Though this vast people lay like a stormcloud on the horizons of civilisation, it was only in sections that there arose and streamed over the world Attila and his Huns, who swept Europe; the hordes of Jenghiz Khan, who swamped both China and Russia simultaneously; Ogdai, the worst of the lot, whose whirlwind path was one long orgy of senseless slaughter; Mangu; Kublai Khan, he of the stately pleasure dome; Timur Leng of the distorted leg, whose crooked limb seems to have twisted his mind into strange shapes. Never at any one time was the nation united as one, or on the move together. The Lord be praised. For one may picture such a mounted horde, stretching from horizon to horizon, innumerable; brown; silent and hurrying along at a steady six miles an hour; rustling, like a carpet of bees; irresistible; terrifying and merciless.

No, they never got on the move together; and, again, the Lord be praised; for, had it been otherwise, you and I (had we, indeed, ever been born) should now be short of stature, massive of limb and slant of eye, our skin dingy in spite of many baths. For the Tartars would have swamped the earth.

The danger is past, nor can it ever come again. Wars are now a matter of machinery, of economics and complicated organisation. Wars are won in the air, under the sea, in chemists' shops, any way but by floods of irresistible humanity, however grim and ruthless. Picture such a horde; picture yourself suddenly viewing it across the plain; "lummy, what a gift!"—and reaching for the machine-gun.

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In the five hundred years from 1360 to 1860 there is no doubt that the thing was both possible and terrible.

I say 1360, because in that year the first Ming Emperor of China had managed to drive the Tartar race out of China, and to roll its eastern section back, for good, on to its centre, thereby consolidating the nation. Furthermore, by then a certain dawning national consciousness had begun to overspread the Turanian peoples. The splendours of the countries conquered in raid and invasion had not been without their effect, and the Tartars had begun to be wealthy. Light come, light go, as it might be with any pirates, by land or by sea, some of it stuck; and the consolidation of the race began to take shape through its fixed possessions.

Had there been one man, one genius, to inspire the tribes, the movement might have gone more quickly, and with it the danger to the world would have grown. There might have been a widespread prophecy of the reincarnation of Jenghiz Khan and his Golden Horde. The movement might have hinged round some great city saved from the wreck. Luckily, the idea fell into hands of the Shâman wizards, they who practised the black magic and the devil-propitiation which formed the Tartar religion. But the Shâmans, as sombre and obscure as the blind and unimaginative race itself, failed to produce an ideal which would breathe life into the movement.

Now Shâmanism is a dark thing: an introspective wizardry devoid of emotion or constructive appeal. It deals largely in mesmerism and the black arts, in signs and talismans, and in the multiplicity and universality of devildom, needing propitiation by the wizard. The talisman idea looms largely in it; and all that the Shâman wizards could produce as an ideal by which to breathe life into the racial solidarity which they sought to foster

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was a vague talk of a Sign to come. With this idea they barely kept alive the conception, which made little headway through the centuries. Had it ever blazed forth, certainly in the later period, it would have become a flaming anxiety to Mongolia's two near neighbours, Russia and India, and after them to the whole world.

The Turks, that race akin to the Tartars, seem to have known of it in the sixteenth century, and even to have tried to foster it ; but they worked along the narrow lines of Islam and got the thing confused with the notion of a Holy War, thereby missing the whole point. In 1916 the Germans, irritated by the stagnation of their failing efforts, turned this way and that, and bit like a rabid dog at anything that offered. The Boche had a fixed policy of missing no chances, however small ; and someone in the German War Office unearthed Pan-Turanianism from the files, and set the movement working once more. That stormy petrel, Enver Pasha, was entrusted with the belated business of getting it going again. Its ramifications were many, its potentialities vast. Let those who remember ' Dunsterforce ' on the Caspian and the miseries of the East Persian Cordon speak of what it cost us in lives and money. Enver lived long enough to see the whole thing collapse before he died in a messy border-scrap in the midst of the Provinces which should have been the king-pin of the whole movement.

It died with him. *Dieu merci.* It was a mighty danger.

II.

There is no doubt that the Pan-Turanian movement was slowly gaining ground up to 1800. In fragments, and at long intervals, it penetrated to the slow brain of John Company, not by its classified name, but as a vague

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incentive, a restlessness defying location and analysis, a stormcloud below the horizon with an intermittent flicker of reflected lightning; intangible, but full of menace.

So in 1832 the Company sent Lieutenant Alexander Burnes off into the blue, with a vague mission to go as far as he could into Turkestan and to find out anything he could about anything which might strike him as interesting. He got to Bokhara by devious ways and in disguise, the first white man to get there from India. He did some wonderfully useful work, and seems to have struck, as a side-issue, this Pan-Turanianism, though under the guise of what he thought was a *jihád* or religious uprising. Being a Scot, and thorough, he nosed along this trail, and came across a persistently recurring detail concerning a Talisman with which the movement was unaccountably commingled. This was, by hearsay, a hand—a silver hand—variously described as the Dást, or Dást-i-Sikándar, 'Alexander's Hand'; and lay in the citadel of Herát Fort, on the Hari Rud.

Now the fortress and town of Herát was one of a trio of cities (Bokhara and Samarkand being the others) which Alexander, in B.C. 328, on his way from conquered Persia to his impending conquests in India, subjugated and compacted into the province of Bactria. The Greek colonies were firmly established there for two hundred years, till the Tartars made an end of them; and during that time the arts and culture of Greece held full grip on the land. Alexander's was a name with which to conjure, and persists as an influence to this day in all parts of Upper India. The magic of this name kept alive and inviolate the numerous military settlements which marked Alexander's onward path, and which, after his death, persisted as islands in the midst of the sea of a hostile

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population for centuries. Judged by the sheer geographical reach of his personality, the man must have been a marvel.

Herát, as valueless in loot as Bokhara and Samarkand were valuable, is one of those strategic points to be found up and down the world, with a history of mixed fighting running back into the dim beginnings of all warfare, which will still be nursing its latest wounds when Gabriel blows the Last Trump. Alexander's name overlies it still, though it has suffered siege, storm and destructions innumerable since his day; and traces of the Greek occupation in pottery, coins and carved stone are constantly being excavated. So that when Alexander Burnes told his tale of the Dást-i-Sikándar of Herát and stated his belief that round it hung some occult significance of great political value to his masters, the masters smiled; admitting, indeed, its probable existence in a land full of Alexandrine relics, but refusing to recommend it as a serious subject to their Foreign Department; and when, six years later, John Company sent troops to Herát to help to stave off a Persian invasion, and those troops had the run of Herát for over a year, the matter was not even mentioned to their commander as a subject to be reported on (if, indeed, it existed at all), and he came away without having heard of it.

But next year, in 1839, one of that venturesome band of Indian native explorers and secret service agents who are perpetually roaming the outer marches of our Indian Empire, and who, even in those days, were known in our Foreign Department at Simla by initials or numbers lest long-armed vengeance should pursue them, settled for a while in Herát, where he got the job of body-servant to the Afghan commander of the Fort garrison. His report, as recorded on his return a year later, is a mass

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of important detail, every line of which bears witness not only to his persistent enterprise but also to a memory unsurpassed since Marco Polo, since, as was customary, he kept no written notes. But one thing which he risked his life to bring away was a clear pen-and-ink drawing of the Dást-i-Sikándar and the sarcophagus-shaped stone box, some twenty-four inches by twelve, which enclosed it.

Both sketches and report are on the files; and though for many years they have ceased to be more than interesting curiosities, the contemporary scribbled marginal notes by the highest in the land seem to show that for some forty years they were treated with a respect due only to dynamite or nitro-glycerine.

The description, both of the thing itself and of its casket, is curious. The hand is about twice life-size. It is massive and of pure silver. The modelling, even down to the network of lines on the palm, is perfect. The veins on the back are anatomically correct; and where the clean sweep of the wrist-bones would join the arm, the work finishes in a raised key-pattern border of unmistakable Greek design. The man who sat for the model must have been one of strong character, to judge by the masterful outlines. The whole thing is rather impressive.

Its sarcophagus-shaped casket is in every way a curiosity. It is of the black schist, hard to carve and very lasting, from which many of the Græco-Indian carvings have been wrought. The sides are plain, but the top is carved in high relief. Within, again, a Greek key-pattern border are two figures; on the left a winged female figure—a Niké, maybe—beautifully draped, carrying the conventional palm-frond and raised left hand; on the right a peculiar thing. Its head is stately and impressive, with flowing hair and beard and strongly intellectual features, quite good enough to be a Zeus; good shoulders

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and arms, bare. But where a fine torso would be expected, or at least flowing draperies, are a sagging chest and a bulging abdomen, which might have been copied from some good-humoured Chinese joss. Not only that, but the folds of fat overflow the edge of a *dhoti*, the universal loin-cloth trousers of India to this day, sordid and unhandsome. Nor is this enough; for the sculptor, instead of letting the figure stand erect, has shown it squatting—what we call 'baitho'ing' in India—an attitude which serves, if the body be gross, to bring out its very worst curves.

The whole thing is grotesque. It is impossible to imagine that the Alexandrine craftsman of Bactria, that home of virile impulses, could have copied it from life. And yet there it is. Cover the figure on the right, and the casket is a stately bit of artistry. Cover the left figure and expose the right, and the work is saved from a monstrous repulsiveness only by the craftsman's obvious skill. A piece of archæological skylarking. I cannot to this day imagine what it means.

At ground-level, between the two figures, are indications of the sockets which once held a piece of metal-work, now vanished. Careful inspection of marks on the stone gives the impression that the lost piece was a silver miniature of the Hand inside; but what Niké and Zeus-*cum*-Dives were meant to be doing with it is beyond my comprehension.

A ragged chip off the left-hand bottom corner exposes the texture of the stone.

But, to resume.

In the following year a second initialled agent was working in the same district. He had seen the first report, and thought it worth the risk to push the matter farther. The service into which he managed to introduce himself

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with the Fort governor was, it is to be feared, much less reputable than that of his forerunner, but was more comprehensive and confidential. He came back some time later, half-dead from the nearly successful attempt by one of the governor's women to poison him. He told a vague story of abstracted keys and subterranean ferretings. But there was no vagueness about his confirmation of the Dást, which he had handled on three different occasions. He added one detail which had escaped his predecessor and did not come out in the sketch, and that was that the hollowness of the wrist which might have been mistaken for the casting was in reality a shaped socket made to fit a pole or lance-shaft. Might it have been used to crown a banner, a flagstaff? It might.

The reinforcing information which he added was definite, and commanded attention. His duties having lain in a certain section of the bazaar, he had kept his ears open. Now the information to be obtained from that part of Eastern womanhood which is accessible is, in direct contrast with its Western counterpart, both reliable and important. It took, let us call him, X.Y.Z. some six months to put together, check and cross-check the fact that the cities of Turkestan, the centres of the virile population of Central Asia, and the innumerable Mongol nomads behind them, were pervaded with a single idea and purpose, and, beneath an inscrutable exterior, were waiting—tense as a bow-string. The whisper which ran up and down India later, in the spring of 1857, would have been feeble compared with this stimulus which pulsed through the width and breadth of a continent. The Tartars were waiting for a Sign. What sign? Nobody knew. Who should bring it? A shrug of the shoulders, and palms stretched outwards. But insistently, when vagueness reached its haziest mystery, would recur the

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whisper of " Sikándar. The Dást-i-Sikándar ! " Thereafter, silence.

In between these long silences the least imaginative could picture to himself the countless nomad hordes of Mongolia ; the great mass of horsemen, from horizon to horizon ; brown ; a swarm of bees. The distant whisper of countless unshod hoofs on the plains ; noiseless and voiceless men ; and the hoofs rustling, rustling . . .

Whither ? To what end ? Nobody knew. But the imagination saw men and beasts dead and contorted, towns in smoking ruin and blank desolation in the wake of those moving myriads.

Then the information shut down. Agent after agent was sent to verify—to amplify—to fill the gaps in a mystery which by now was treated with hushed alarm, and was entrusted to nobody but the highest half-dozen in the land. Of the agents only one came back, and he with the purple wounds of recent lacerating tortures so thickly on him that he died before he could fully describe his failure.

The matter could not rest there. Native agents had failed ; but, a couple of years later, two white men, Captains Stoddart and Connolly, were despatched, nominally on a political mission to Nasr Ullah, the Khan of Bokhara, actually to move *viâ* Herát and to find out all they could of the Dást and the mystery which surrounded it. They disappeared over the frontier. Months later they found means to send back a report ; the Dást, stone-casing and all, had disappeared. The mystery prophecies of an impending Sign had given place to an irritated helplessness, where each man in a whisper accused the other, " Was it thou, brother ? " ; where the innocent were grabbed up out of the purlieus of the bazaar and twisted to death in the Citadel to extract a non-

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existent secret ; and where a fevered and furious search went forward from day to day behind an inscrutable veil of silence.

Stoddart's report was quite definite. The Dást had been stolen, spirited away ; and the Governor of the Citadel, the only man who could have thrown any light on it, was dead. Of a fever ? Possibly, of a fever.

Stoddart and Connolly went forward. A while after, they reported to India their arrival at a village on the outskirts of Bokhara and their intention of entering the city and waiting on the Khan next day. Then, like a wall, silence shut down on them also, and not a message nor a word did they send again.

What happened to them is well known. The whole pitiful story was pieced together from native reports. In that year, 1842, the prestige of John Company's servants was already high enough to give them safety even in far-away Bokhara. So it must have been something very urgent which prompted Nasr Ullah, the Khan, to do these two staunch soldiers to death in the ghastly way of which we know. In a corner of the market-place gaped a well-like pit some fifteen feet deep. This opened out at the bottom into a cave-like chamber, with no opening but the circle of sky at the pit-mouth ; no other air nor light ; and the whole floor of that charnel-house lay feet deep in the rotting remains of malefactors and others, done to death at the place of public execution in the market-place and their bodies flung down the pit.

In this indescribable dungeon they were kept, a pittance of foul water and *chupattis* lowered to them daily, not for days or weeks but for months. At the end of that time they were hauled up. Blanched and scraggy, with matted hair and beards, their clothing all but rotted off them, they were dragged to the Black Stone. Five minutes

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later their lifeless bodies were pitched back into the pit whence they had emerged.

It is a living and lasting sorrow that no vengeance was ever exacted from their slayer. The story of their end, as published for the softening of the blow to their home-folk, contained something more than a suggestion that the Khan had offered them their lives if they would renounce Christianity and that they steadfastly refused. But Nasr Ullah was no fanatic to let his religion overcome prudence in his treatment of the Sirkár's white servants; nor is there any record of his being egged on to it by the numerous *mullahs* of that abode of Mussulman learning. Far more probable, to my mind, is the theory that hardly had they entered the presence of the Khan than he rose in his seat and accused them of stealing from the Citadel of Herát, Allah knew by what means, the Dást-i-Sikándar; and they, poor fellows, indignantly denying it, and to the last unable to save themselves by restoring to him an object on which they had never set eyes, were flung into the pit.

The greater credence attaches to this version from the fact that on the first night of their arrival near the city their papers were rifled, and, with them, the confidential instructions bearing on the main object of their journey disappeared as well. But it is all of a piece with the mystery which obstinately shrouded everything connected with the talisman that, though the native reports were painfully precise in the details of all that was done to the two officers, no shadow of motive for the Khan's vindictive cruelty was ever suggested.

One thing, however, is certain. From that time onwards the Dást ceased to trouble. Search high, search low; by ways effective and—in any other cause—questionable; through white man, through brown man, the hunt

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went forward. The search did not stop, even while India writhed in the horrors of 1857. Gradually it died down. The thing had clean vanished.

Now I am not suggesting for a moment that hard-headed men at the helm believed that a cataclysm in Central Asia hung of necessity on the presence or absence of the thing which had disappeared. But the implications of what such an upheaval would mean were such that anything intimately connected with it simply had to be taken seriously. And, apart from the persistent association of the talisman with the well-grounded rumours of a Pan-Turanian outburst, those versed in the ways of the East knew well how often a seemingly trivial object, if wrapped about with sufficient mystery and suggestion, could be made to sway immeasurable human forces. The feeling of relief was therefore deep when it became clear that a dangerous movement had lost its increasing momentum and was apparently wandering in confused circles because the mystical portion of it had somehow been spirited away. Whether *post hoc* or *propter hoc*, there is no doubt that from 1840 onwards Pan-Turanianism was a weakening force. To the Russ, of course, political reasons prevented our confiding either our information or our fears, and the same reasons debarred us from enlisting his help in a combined movement to scotch the peril. So that it was by the happiest coincidence that he, of his own volition, got on the move. Completely ignorant of anything approaching a Pan-Turanian danger, and driven only by expansionist motives, he had by 1868 penetrated to Tashkent and Turkestan, thereby slicing into two clean halves the nations which would have formed the Tartar Confederacy. The countless nomad Mongols to the eastward were separated from the resources of

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Samarkand and Bokhara to the westward, and from the brains which informed them. With mind divorced from matter, Pan-Turanianism died for good and all.

The 'Russian Menace' took its place. But to those who could follow step by step all that had gone before, the 'menace' was a flip of the fingers and a shooting out of the lip compared with the vastness of the danger which had vanished.

III.

Osborne House, in the Isle of Wight, has, since 1904, been a convalescent home for officers of both—or all three—Services. In days before the war, cases of battle-damage were in the minority; for, prosaic though it be, more than half the patients were suffering from either damaged knees (the knee being an infernally tricky joint) or from appendices present or recently absent in the wave of appendicomania which swept the land in the decade before the war. The large majority were officers on the active list; but, very occasionally, a veteran from a past generation would drift in to repair the ravages of *anno domini* and to renew a long-past youth in the company of those who, in some cases, might well have been his grandsons.

Propped on rug and cushion against the bole of the great cedar on the front lawn, one of these veterans, one long summer evening, supplied me with a bit of unrecorded history which, to my lasting surprise, provided the sequel to what I have tried to record above.

"You lads look very trim," he said. "Expect you smile a bit at this old jacket of mine"—he always wore a wadded black smoking-jacket for dinner. "Old bones, you know; easier than mess-kit. You don't bother much with mess-kit, now you're down here? All the old cus-

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toms seem to be going somehow, and it's all for loose comfort and that sort of thing, isn't it? I wonder how you would have liked to go fighting in tight blue serge, with a white helmet and belt and a sword dangling, as we did in Afghanistan in 1879? We did; anyhow, we of the cavalry and British infantry who went up first. Blue-serge jackets, tight breeches and a white pot helmet, come sun or snow; and if you wore a Sam Browne belt it was either that you were a General or on the Staff. It was 'side' for anyone else to be seen in one, and you got told off about it. The later infantry took a better tip from the Native Army when they came up in cotton khaki; but even then the soldier's khaki was only his white cotton uniform of cantonments sent down to the bazaar to be dyed before the regiment marched, and the result was pretty patchy, I remember. You do things better now. The slung sword was an abomination; you always needed a spare hand to carry it; and what with slung swords and jack-boots, there was little use in dismounting my troopers for fire action, so we mostly stayed on our horses and let the carbines be.

"What were the Afghans like? They were fine men—finer, individually, than our fellows—and they kept you full on the stretch whenever you took them on. I never saw one of them in a fight but meant it heart and soul. Great tall devils, as hard as nails and very strong; faces like hawks, and hairy. They fought always to come to hand grips—their foot soldiers, I mean. Their cavalry never showed up much, except once, on the Ahmed Khel day; but their foot people fought well, in line. They fought with long *tulwárs*, which they kept as sharp as razors, always using the cutting edge, and a round target shield of hide. Our long Martini and bayonet had only an inch or two the better reach of an Afghan stretching

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himself to a full cut. They stood up to us cavalry, too, and weren't a bit reluctant about it, giving as good as they took. They had firearms, of course, mostly match-lock *jezails* as tall as themselves, with which they used to snipe from the hills; but only a sprinkling of *jezails* in their battle lines. The *jezailchis* were generally the older men.

"There was only one thing to be done with their attack when they came on: fire as far off and as fast as the men's musketry training would allow. If that failed to keep them off, the supporting lines generally had to come up to restore matters when the front began to bulge inwards. That was where good drill discipline came in—without that we should have been broken many a time.

"Those were the days when our eight-company infantry battalions fought in line, five companies in front and the other three in support. Our brigade fighting front must have stretched a good mile, by a quarter of a mile deep, the batteries in the intervals and we cavalry handy in rear and to a flank as opportunity served and ground demanded. The infantry used volleys, by companies; none of your independent firing, which was looked on as bad discipline. I remember the British used to look down on the Native Infantry quite a lot for this reason—the Gurkhas particularly being prone to individual shooting, being angry little devils in a fight, and each liking to see his man fall. But the Sikhs were less easily roused and held to the British pattern. You should have seen them at Ahmed Khel when the rest of the line was sagging about here and there and things getting mixed. There they stood like a wall and took the full force of the Ghilzai charges for an hour. I went over the ground afterwards and saw the line of empty brass Snider cases where the Sikhs had stood. You could have driven a cart down the

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line, and the cases would all have lain between the two wheel tracks "—and the old chap drew, with his walking-stick, two parallel lines on the turf, and paused, staring at them pensively.

"Did the Afghans fight fair? On the whole, yes. Of course, if you were caught alone, strolling out of camp or without an escort, they got you. Also it was just as well not to be left on the ground, wounded, after a fight. If you left any wounded out they used to cut them up, slowly," and he went into details.

"Yes, they were fine fighters. The Ghilzais and Durânis were the best of them, and they must have put a hundred thousand into the field from first to last.

"We went up with the first column after the Ali Masjid fight, straight through the Khyber Pass and on to the plains beyond Dakka, travelling mainly by night, as it was furnace heat by day in those narrow rocky gorges.

"We cavalry had little but scouting to do to begin with, and we saved our horses all we could. It was a sad, bad land for horses, especially for our heavy English beasts and Waler remounts. I had a big heavy cob with a butt-end on him like a card-table. We used to call him the Cyclops; but he was well bred, and as nimble as a cat on bad ground for all the sixteen stone I rode in full marching order.

"My squadron commander was Harris, a fine soldier. He was also a keen archæologist, having spent a couple of years as attaché in some kind of research department of the Foreign Office at Simla, where, on the Q.T., they show you all kinds of unexpected things. He was perpetually coughing up odd bits of queer information about the land we were going through, and, I remember, he made the old Khyber live like a museum as we passed along it. Alexander, and what not. A rarity for us in those days,

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a brainy soldier. But a jolly good man in a fight, all the same.

"Well, as I say, we were mostly employed in scouting. The plains were wide: to look at them you would think that they could not conceal a mouse. But they were seamed with nullahs: nothing very deep, but enough to conceal a thousand men here and there, and all wanted searching. We couldn't afford a close-quarter rush on the solid slow-moving formations in which brigades moved in those days. It was not till afterwards, on the Kandahar march, that Roberts taught us how to move on a broad front in a loose square—very flexible. We found little to keep us busy. The occasional old shepherd was probably a spy, but showed no fight even when we had to polish off the vicious great sheep-dogs who would go for a man mounted as readily as for one on foot.

"Did we have a fight?

"We did.

"It was this way. We'd been in the country round about Jalálabad for a fortnight, the Afghan armies from the Khyber apparently out of the picture for good, when we got word that a large force was massing to the westward to come down on us. Next morning there they were, a great dark mass out on the plain, with splashes of colour where their standards showed up. No need of scouting to find them. It was the real thing at last.

"Out came our infantry and guns, and we formed up on the plain. We of the cavalry were in reserve, in rear of the left, where the job looked as if it would be hardest. Then we started slowly across the plain towards them, the guns stopping now and then to play at long-bowls. This set the Afghans moving towards us; and then we realised that the great yellow flat wasn't the billiard table it looked. It rose and fell in long flat billows, so that at

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one time the two forces were in full view, and five minutes later the plain in front of us looked empty. The long waves would hide an army in line, and there was a criss-cross of deep nullahs to our left front. Even I, young and newly joined, could see that it would have been as well to have a few scouts out ahead. Anyhow, it was no business of mine, and our people went ahead steadily, raising a lot of dust but keeping a good line.

"It seemed no time before the infantry got to close grips with large bodies of Afghans, who were coming down on the attacking front in clumps and by rushes, each charge carrying a banner. Our people were holding their fire till close quarters—very foolish; but all was for discipline and a stout straight line in those days. I heard a Captain sing out to his Company, 'Now then, boys; give 'em a good one. *All* together, now'; and then *p-r-r-rp! cr-r-r-mp!* 'good crisp volleys,' as the Aldershot Generals liked to hear them on a field day on the Fox Hills. Trying, for the infantry. It must have been over trying for some of them. As I looked I saw a subaltern break out of the line, followed by three or four of his men, and go straight for the first group of Afghans. He got the standard-bearer with a beautiful point, and the two went down together as the others closed in on them, all hacking and jabbing and a lot of dust. One infantryman broke away and got back to our line, but the rest were flat on the plain as the standard rose again and the group swept forward, to be volleyed into a heap by the Company twenty yards away.

"All down the line these charges kept coming on, and many of them got to grips with our men.

"The firing was pretty general now, and our line steadying to a slow walk, the main body of the Afghans coming down on it like a black thunder-cloud.

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"Then things began to move faster in our area. A galloper came down from the centre, full split, pulled up alongside our Colonel and gave him a quick message, pointing the while out into the plain to our left front. In a minute we found ourselves trotting out in column to our left, to clear the supporting companies of infantry on that flank. I asked Harris, my squadron commander, what was on. He called the other troop-leaders up and told us there was a heavy force of Ghilzai swordsmen coming down from the left under the shelter of the nullahs, and that we had been told to break them up as soon as they got out on to the plain and before they could get into the left flank of our infantry attack. I could see nothing. The plain was just as flat and as yellow as ever. Harris couldn't either. But I pulled up till my troop came abreast and gave the N.C.O.'s the orders. They passed them on to the men, who began to lose touch a little as they peered out over the plain, seeing as much as I could, and that was nothing.

"We had cleared the left flank of the infantry when the Colonel sang out an order, and I found my troop in the first squadron line, slowed to a walk and nothing in front of us but mile after mile of yellow stony desert, and the mirage jumbling up hills and dust-devils into one mass of dancing scenery on the horizon.

"We moved forward at the trot, and I found we were mounting a long smooth swell of the plain, a long way to an imperceptible crest in the foreground. The Colonel and one of the Majors were riding ahead. Harris called me over to him and explained that when we saw the Ghilzais we were to go for them, hence our formation. Where were they? *He* didn't know, but they were there somewhere, and if we went on long enough we'd find them, he supposed; and I'd better get back to my troop, because

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we might be busy any moment. So back to the troop I went, and told them what little I knew; and before I'd finished telling the N.C.O.'s it dawned on me that I was in for my first cavalry charge.

"I think it dawned on us all at the same moment; anyhow, my troop sergeant-major began to see to the dressing, amid some cursing. The Khyber, and very mixed camping, hadn't improved our drill. But the ranks closed up; and at this moment we saw the Punjab cavalry trotting out into line on our left, their half-dozen British officers out in front and the Ressaldars seeing to the squadron-leading. They got their sabres out, and I found my men drawing swords. No order given, but I let it be; and Harris saw it and sang out to 'draw swords.'

"The ranks closed up and we trotted forward up the rise, all going well together and the noise increasing somewhat.

"The Punjabis on our left were the first to spot them. I saw their Colonel throw up his hand and point forward as we approached the crest. Almost at the same moment we, too, saw them. We topped the crest, good going underfoot, and no obstacles. The ground fell away gently to our front to a shallow dip four hundred yards away; thence it rose gently in another long wave.

"And there, two-thirds of the way down the far slope, were the Ghilzais.

"There must have been some thousands of them, a line about five hundred yards long and a solid ten deep. They came on in silence, keeping a rough dressing—swordsmen, *jezailchis* and a few mounted men here and there, all very compact and rather grim. The line looked grey and black with their puttoo and sheepskin coats and a foundation of dirty white moving below, where their rusty cotton pyjamas clothed their legs.

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"They came steadily down the slope. They spotted us and came to a halt. Out flashed their long swords in hundreds, and they stood a moment. Presently they began to move forward again, down to the dip.

"We also halted on the crest. The Colonel called to his trumpeter, and the call rang out; first at a walk, a bit of jostling here and there, immediately checked by the sergeants; and then we were trotting.

"The whole thing, from the trumpet-call till we were into them, couldn't have lasted ninety seconds, and yet I can remember quite vividly a dozen things happening. Harris and I and the other troop-leaders were out in front, in line with the C.O., who had put away his field-glasses and was blowing his nose. The Major rode alongside him. I saw Harris lug out his sword, and I followed suit, and the men clattered along behind. Then a doubt got me: the Ghilzai line ahead looked infernally solid, and I wondered whether I hadn't better use a revolver. I put my sword back and pulled out my revolver. It felt very solid and satisfactory, till I remembered that it would be useless after the sixth round, and I was putting it back again when Harris shouted to me to keep my men in hand. I found we had outdistanced the others, and the troop line was beginning to bulge. He and I pulled up a bit and shouted to the men to keep their dressing. Some of them had started cantering, and there was a little crowding. I distinctly remember one man—he must have been getting his knees painfully squashed—hurl out an oath and catch his next file a swipe with the hilt. But they pulled together quick. I tugged out my sword again, ran my hand through the stout leather wrist-strap, and then things began to happen.

"The Ghilzais, compact and steady, had crossed the dip and were mounting our slope, their swords twinkling

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in the sun. We had lessened the distance to a couple of hundred yards, and now we were cantering, all together and serene. I never saw the men going better, even on a ceremonial parade. No shouting, but a good deal of clatter. The Cyclops was waking up and beginning to pull a bit. What's to happen when we get into them? thinks I. And then it flashed across me what our old roughrider sergeant had told me: 'Hold straight, sir; if two men meet, point-on, it isn't stalemate. One of them is sure to drop his point at the last to try and guard, but the one who really means it gets in and gets his man.' Hold straight it was, then; and, anyhow, the point was the only thing against thick sheepskin coats. I shouted it back to the men—point, point, use the point! Confound the noise, would they never hear?

"No time for pulling back to make them hear. The Cyclops was pulling in earnest now, and going great guns. The pace increased, the din grew; rattle, clatter and hammer of hoofs. Now the men started shouting—no hooraying but just a sort of hoi! hoi! and mixed shouts and swearing, Harris on my right damning away good and proper and the thing going to one's head like wine.

"The Ghilzais stopped. You could see their faces plainly now. 'Stopped, good lord—they're done for. The line halted, taking a charge. Done for — done for!'

"The din and the dust grew terrific as we thundered down on them, a group of eagle-eyed, black-bearded swordsmen just ahead of me. I saw two of them drop their swords and stoop to pick up chunks of stone; shaken, going back to primitive first principles as men will when they get rattled. An old greybeard upped with his *jezail* and drew a bead on me. Damn him! *Who-o-o-oop*, into

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them now! I bent low along the Cyclops' neck, sword outstretched as far as I could reach, and pointed for the exposed arm-pit of the man stooping to the stone.

"WHUMP!—into them

"Though I felt nothing, I knew the point had got him, for the sword was wrenched out of my grasp as we tore past, the loop only holding it. A big yellow explosion right in my face as the old *jezailchi* pulled the trigger and the Cyclops threw up his head and caught me an almighty clout on the cheek and helmet. I grabbed at the sword-hilt and got the point forward again. The Cyclops crashed into something and half came down, just as a big Ghilzai smote a tremendous swipe at my exposed back. The blade whistled past my ear, missing me by a hair's-breadth. I jabbed at him furiously. The point jarred into his face-bones, and he went down all of a heap. I found myself all mixed up with our people, Sergeant Green, I remember, hammering and slashing away on my left. A big Sikh Ressaldar had found his way into the jumble on my right, and cut down two before a pack of them closed in on him, tugged him from the saddle and hacked him to bits on the ground. My troop were barging about all over the place, all of them forgetting the point and using the edge all they knew how, and the people on foot were going over like nine-pins.

"Then I saw we had them. Their line broke up into groups, and though they were very sticky some of them must have had enough, for they began to run. Then it was yoicks and away after them! Sergeant Green and half a dozen had broken through, and were hunting them down—single troopers and knots of sowárs joining in, each picking a group or a man and clearing them up.

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There was nothing more happening near me, and I tried to get some of the men together. We had gone about two hundred yards beyond the point where the first crash had happened, and the Ghilzai line was all to bits; but a couple of dozen of them, stout fellows, had formed a clump about fifty yards to our left, round a green and black standard of sorts, facing us, and looking ugly.

"Suddenly Harris emerged from the dog-fight behind. He barged up alongside me, grabbed me by the arm and pointed to the clump ahead of us. He was trying to say something, his voice all thick and raggy with shouting. '*What?*—can't hear in all this din.' He pointed again and shouted in my ear; and then I got it. 'Sikándar. The Dást-i-Sikándar, man. *Look!*' It was the standard he was pointing at, a big green flag with black arabesque characters on it; and at the top of the pole something silvery and glittering, which looked like a large human hand.

"I shouted some men together, to make a line with us and go for them, and they were pulling out in my direction when I saw a duffadár of the native cavalry swing up with ten of his men and go slap into them from behind, the big curved *tulwárs* rising and falling like flails, and the knot of Ghilzais just burst asunder—nothing left of them. The duffadár went for the standard-bearer, who was crouching among the dead. I saw the standard pole raised, crosswise, to guard the owner's head. I saw the raised *tulwár* and the stunning sweep of the blow which shore through pole and arm as the duffadár swept past. One of his men, following at a gallop, stooped low in the saddle and caught up the fallen trophy. He straightened up, and whirled the thing round his head—as a man whirls his lance when he has taken the peg—and

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'*hai-i-e-e-eee!*' rang out his long, triumphant squeal above the tumult.

"'Lord! they've got it,' gasped Harris.

"The knot of sowárs rode off at a canter to find their Colonel, we after them. It must have looked like a kind of unofficial guard of honour. They found him. He was looking cool and breezy, I remember; I dunno how, but he hadn't the look we all had of having butted head-foremost through a thorn hedge. They pulled up in front of him, forgetting to salute, and the duffadár came forward. He pushed the standard forward, reaching out the silver hand towards the Colonel, who saluted, stretched out and touched it; hand meeting silver hand; touch and remit, as is the way in the East; and '*Shabásh!* Hira Singh,' said he.

"The Sikándar is in their mess now. They have it out on guest nights sometimes. I've seen it there when I've dined with them. It was a queer thing, and I often wish I knew more about it. Old Harris knew; he seemed to recognise it the moment he saw it. But he never told me; poor chap, he was killed that same afternoon.

"I wonder what it was . . ."

I told him. I was still telling him when the Matron came out and swept us off to bed.

IV.

Now comes the queer part of the business. In 1923 I was home on leave, and, as the period terminated, *res angustæ domi* became (as often happens to the furlough man) rather insistent, so that I was impelled to take to a firm which likes these things a small batch of rather

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unusual war medals collected in India. The firm also buys and sells curious treasures of all sorts; and its manager, for wide erudition, is the only man I know who could equal the owner of Kim's curiosity shop on Simla Mall, and of whose identity many Kipling lovers are aware. Our business done, he asked me to give an opinion on an unusual piece acquired that day from a lady who had recently lost her husband in India, whose goods she had been compelled (again by *res angustæ*) to sort and reduce. He had sold it that afternoon to an American collector and was on the point of packing it. He led me to an inner room and took a weighty parcel from a safe. Carrying it to a table under a strong electric globe, he undid the wrappings. "There, now; what do you think of that? It's a fine piece, and quite unique: a bit of real Græco-Indian carving. And genuine. Do you agree?"

I gazed, and could hardly believe my eyes. Line by line, and chip by chip, I went over it, as I had often pondered over the sketch in that inner room in the office at Simla. There was the angel, there the squatting Jove with his Rabelaisian tummy and the folds of his very un-Greek loin-cloth; there, too, was the unmistakable chip off the left-hand lower corner, showing the texture of the black schist whose surface the ages had elsewhere worn to a dirty grey.

Genuine? Here was the very slab which, for well over two thousand years, had covered Alexander's silver hand!

I gazed.

I took off my spectacles and rubbed the bridge of my nose. I almost rubbed my eyes. *Genuine?*

"Undoubtedly genuine," I think I muttered. But my antiquarian must have thought me infernally rude, be-

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cause, as far as I remember, I walked straight out on to the pavement without saying good-bye to him, and stood there, all of a dither.

Lummy, *what* a small world !

Somebody in a hurry cannoned into me, and I turned into Piccadilly Circus to catch my bus.

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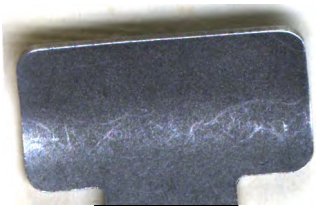

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